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**The Place and Meaning of  
‘Physical Education’ to  
Practitioners and Children at  
Three Preschool Contexts  
in Scotland**

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PhD

The University of Edinburgh

2012

# **The place and meaning of ‘physical education’ to practitioners and children at three preschool contexts in Scotland**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis investigates the place and meaning of ‘physical education’ to practitioners and children at three preschool settings in a city in Scotland. The thesis examines the discourses of physical education at the preschools, and interrogates the ways in which the participants engaged with these discourses in order to construct their subjectivities. Preschool physical education has been largely unexplored by researchers and this study thus gives insight into how practitioners and children engage with, take up and resist particular discourses. The study contributes to physical education and early childhood education research by connecting separate bodies of sociocultural, and more specifically poststructural, research related to both fields. A poststructural, Foucaultian theoretical framework underpins the thesis. It features discourse analysis and particularly draws on Foucault’s work around techniques of power and the ‘technologies of the self’. The first step in the discourse analysis involved examining potential sources of discourses the practitioners were likely to draw on. This entailed analysing the physical education sections of the curricular documentation used at the settings (Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence), and analysing texts related to preschool physical education continued professional development (CPD) that some of the practitioners participated in. Analysis indicated that physical activity and health discourses are prevalent throughout the curricular documentation. Discourses related to motor skill development and play also prevail. Motor skill development and physical activity discourses are prevalent in the documentation related to CPD. The second step in the discourse analysis involved analysing language patterns in the participants’ talk. Fourteen practitioners and 70 children participated in the study. Research methods employed were observations, interviews with adults, a group drawing and discussion activity with children, and interviews with children. Discourses related to motor skill development, play, physical activity and health, along with a related pedagogical discourse concerning ‘structure and freedom’, appeared to underpin ‘physical education’ at the three contexts, in different ways. For instance, the settings differed in the extent to which motor skill development underpinned physical education, with pedagogies often being more adult-led where this discourse was stronger. This thesis highlights that preschool practitioners and children engage in multiple, complex ways with a range of physical education discourses that currently have currency in Scotland.

## **Declaration**

I hereby declare that I, Nollaig McEvilly, have composed this thesis. It is entirely my own work, other than the counsel of my supervisors, and has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Acknowledgements**

Thanks to the practitioners and children at Oakdale, Cheery Faces and Sunnyland for making this thesis possible.

Thanks to Dr. Martine Verheul and Dr. Matthew Atencio for their constant support, encouragement and guidance.

Thanks to Mike Jess, the Developmental Physical Education Group and the Scottish Primary Physical Education Project for funding and supporting the research.

Thanks to my family and friends for always being there, and for accepting me as I am...it must be nice to see that my stubbornness has been put to good use for once. ;) I love you. x

Thanks to Stephen – knowing I'd see you again once the thesis had been submitted sustained me in the final months of writing up. Welcome to a world in which I hope you'll always have a voice. x

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## **Chapter 1 – Introduction**

### **1.1 Introduction**

This thesis investigates the place and meaning of ‘physical education’<sup>1</sup> to practitioners and children at three preschool settings in a city in Scotland. Preschool<sup>2</sup> physical education has been largely unexplored by researchers. While an increasing body of literature is concerned with preschool physical activity, little is known about preschool physical education, by which I mean planned, structured physical learning experiences in curricular time<sup>3</sup>. This may be because most physical education research has concentrated on the secondary school domain (Kirk, 2005), or because early childhood curricular frameworks tend to be structured according to areas of development, rather than specific subjects (Stephen, 2006). Most early childhood physical education literature I have sourced is published in professional journals such as *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance* (e.g. Liu *et al.*, 2010) and *Early Childhood Education Journal* (e.g. Gagen & Getchell, 2006), or in books aimed at students and practitioners (e.g. Zachopoulou *et al.*, 2010). This literature is concerned with providing practical advice on teaching and facilitating physical education, rather than reporting on research. It generally concerns early childhood education more widely than preschool (i.e. it also focuses on children in the early years of primary school). According to David (2003), there is an “urgent need for research into young children’s learning in...physical education...in ECEC [early childhood education and care] settings” (p. 18).

This thesis contributes to filling the gap in the literature concerning preschool physical education. It provides insight into what happens regarding physical

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<sup>1</sup> I use single quotation marks because, as is explained in Chapter Five, ‘physical education’ was a term most of the adult participants did not use with regard to preschool contexts.

<sup>2</sup> In this thesis, ‘preschool’ refers to children’s educational experiences before they begin formal schooling (i.e. when they are generally aged three to five years). In many countries, ‘kindergarten’ is similarly defined. In the USA, ‘kindergarten’ caters for five- and six-year-olds in a preliminary year at elementary school before they enter compulsory education in Grade 1 (Bertram & Pascal, 2002). I include ‘kindergarten’ within my definition of preschool. The terms ‘early childhood’ and ‘early years’ concern children up to the age of eight years, be they at preschool or primary school.

<sup>3</sup> This is my definition of physical education when it is not in single quotation marks. ‘Physical education’ (in single quotation marks) refers to any physical activities, physical play and movement experiences at the preschools.

education at three preschool settings and, more specifically, how practitioners and children engage with, take up and resist particular discourses related to physical education. A poststructural, Foucaultian theoretical framework underpins the study. A poststructural perspective regards knowledge and its construction as always context-specific and value-laden (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2007). It problematises fixed notions of identity and social relations (Wright, 2004b) and is concerned with disrupting dominant discourses (Yelland & Kilderry, 2008b). Discourses are sets of truths that are (re)produced through power relations and social practices operating in institutions, such as schools, prisons or, in this case, preschools (Foucault, 1973). Discourses, and therefore ‘truths’<sup>4</sup> (i.e. knowledge), are thus inscribed in power relations (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007). Consequently, poststructuralism is concerned with understanding how power relations operate in particular contexts to privilege certain practices and subjectivities (Wright, 2006). Weedon (1997) defines subjectivity as “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world” (p. 32).

I have not located any research that specifically investigated the discourses of physical education at preschools. Much of the previous sociocultural<sup>5</sup>, and more specifically poststructural, research in physical education and related areas such as physical activity, sport and health has enhanced our understanding of discourses, power relations and subjectivities in relation to secondary school students or adults, with some recent focus on primary school children (e.g. Burrows, 2010a; 2010b). This body of research illustrates how particular discourses become normalised and privileged within particular social and cultural contexts, and then work to create and sustain practices that produce power relations and diverse subjectivities. My study seeks to enhance existing research by similarly drawing on Foucault’s concepts of power, discourse and subjectivity in relation to preschool physical education, an area that has not been investigated in this way before. Such an approach seems timely

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<sup>4</sup> I use single quotation marks throughout the thesis to indicate terms that are subjective (and therefore potentially contested), rather than objective or essential, constructs (Atencio, 2006). Double quotation marks represent direct quotations (from literature and participants).

<sup>5</sup> Sociocultural research is concerned with investigating the effects of critical social and cultural factors (e.g. ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status) on, for example, physical education practices and experiences (Cliff, Wright & Clarke, 2009).

since due to media focus on health and obesity, and national concerns regarding success in sport, discourses relating to physical education for young children have “never had quite so high a profile” (Marsden & Weston, 2007, p. 383).

The primary research question the thesis addresses is:

- What is the place and meaning of ‘physical education’ to practitioners and children at three preschool contexts in a city in Scotland?

In order to investigate this question, the following subset of questions is addressed:

- What are the discourses of physical education at these preschools?
- How do practitioners and children engage with these discourses in order to construct their subjectivities regarding physical education?

The study features discourse analysis and draws on Foucault’s work around techniques of power and technologies of the self. Following Wright (2004b), the first step in the discourse analysis entailed analysing potential sources of discourses the practitioners were likely to draw on (i.e. the physical education sections of the curricular documentation used at the settings, and texts related to preschool physical education continued professional development (CPD) some of the practitioners had participated in). This allowed for the identification and analysis of discourses that were available to the practitioners. The second step required interrogating the participants’ talk. This allowed for the examination of the ways in which particular discourses were taken up by particular individuals. Fourteen practitioners and 70 children participated in the study. In order to analyse patterns in language use, I conducted interviews with adults, a group drawing and discussion activity with children, and interviews with children. I also engaged in participant observation. As with the curricular and CPD documentation, I analysed the transcripts and field-notes in order to investigate the discourses that were circulating, as well as the ways in which the participants engaged with them.

## **1.2 Significance of the study**

As noted, preschool physical education has not been extensively researched, so this study contributes to filling this gap in the literature, particularly since it takes a

poststructural approach. By examining the ways in which preschool practitioners and children engage with, take up and resist particular discourses related to ‘physical education’, this thesis connects separate bodies of sociocultural, and specifically poststructural, research related to early childhood education and physical education. It provides insight into the situations and needs of preschool practitioners and children regarding physical education. By focusing on these particular groups of participants, the study listens to the voices of people who have not previously been consulted in this way by physical education researchers. In doing so, it highlights the ways in which different people engage with particular discourses, thus allowing for greater understanding of the reasons why particular preschool physical education discourses may be supported or resisted. It also illustrates the workings and effects of discourses, including those that may be taken for granted and unquestioningly accepted (MacLure, 2003).

Examining the effects of particular preschool physical education discourses seems especially important in light of the increasing number of epidemiological studies and ensuing policies seeking to increase physical activity participation amongst young children in order to prevent obesity and ‘unhealthiness’. These developments arguably have great power to structure preschool physical education. Interrogating taken-for-granted assumptions and practices is important so that researchers, policy-makers and practitioners can evaluate and critically reflect on the potential workings of particular discourses, and strive to create practices which provide an expansive range of possibilities for inclusive preschool physical education experiences. Interrogating the ways in which children interpret these practices and messages is especially important to this quest, in order to lay bare the effects of these discourses and their concomitant practices on young children.

This concern with interrogating children’s talk is another way the thesis contributes to research related to physical education and early childhood education. Macdonald *et al.* (2005) observe that research related to physical activity and physical education rarely seeks children’s perspectives. They propose that this must change, because children’s perspectives can help with managing and teaching physical activity and

physical education, and with understanding children's choices and health. Although in the six years since Macdonald *et al.* made this comment there has been an increase in the amount of physical education research seeking to listen to children's and young people's voices, this research has primarily involved older children. Early childhood researcher Stephen (2005) believes it is vital to seek young children's perspectives, because amongst the abundance of adult concerns, children's everyday experiences can be overlooked. It is important, therefore, to listen to preschool children's voices in order to understand the ways in which they interpret discourses related to physical education. This contention aligns with a recent Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) report (HMIE, 2009), which declares that children have the right "to have their views taken seriously whenever decisions are being made about them, including how they learn and how they are supported" (p. 2). It also aligns with research related to the sociology of childhood, which similarly assumes that children have a right to have their voices heard in relation to events that concern them (Cobb, Danby & Farrell, 2005). This study, therefore, also contributes to sociology of childhood research.

### **1.3 The researcher's position**

Since the study features a poststructural approach, it is important to provide a brief 'autobiography' in order to explicitly acknowledge my own position and therefore any "conscious and unconscious baggage" (Scheurich, 1997, p. 73) I bring to it. This allows me (and the reader) to interrogate how my intentions and subjectivities will have affected data generation and analysis.

I am 'white', middle-class and female. I qualified as a secondary school physical education teacher in 2004, but had always wanted to study and work with much younger children. Therefore, after finishing university, I worked for four-and-a-half years at a centre that provided play/movement/activity classes for children aged three months to four years (with their parents), and physical activity/sport classes for four-to eight-year-olds. As the classes were extra-curricular and optional, only children whose parents (a) considered movement and physical activity to be important for young children and/or (b) could afford this 'extra' could attend. This sat uneasily

with me, as did the fact that, as a business, one of the centre's main priorities was to make money, while mine was the children's education and experiences. Despite these concerns, this work allowed me to gain invaluable experience of teaching physical education to young children. While working there, I also wanted to do more study in the area, and so completed a master's degree by research in the area of early childhood care and education. My master's thesis focused on parents' views of intervening in preschool children's imaginative play. Play interested me and, as I had briefly studied it in a sociology module as an undergraduate student, it appeared to connect my academic background in physical education with my interest in studying young children. Completing the master's degree opened up new avenues of research I wanted to explore. For instance, I wondered what the children's views would have been. Would they have agreed with their parents, or had different views? My experiences of working with young children and their parents had led me to believe that adults often underestimate young children and tend to speak for them, rather than listen to what they have to say. I was eager to learn more about children's experiences, in their own words. Furthermore, while my master's thesis took a largely uncritical approach to the study of play, it strengthened my belief that there was room in early childhood education for both free play and more adult-led 'physical education'. I was keen to investigate if others (particularly practitioners) agreed with this view, and the reasons why or why not.

The opportunity to study for a PhD related to early childhood physical education gave me the chance to pursue these lines of enquiry. Given the apparent marginalisation of preschool physical education and lack of related literature, my initial ideas were to investigate physical education's place in Scottish preschool education. Despite my practical experience, I knew little about learning and teaching in physical education at preschools. Questions I had included: what happens during physical education at preschools? Is there even such thing as 'preschool physical education'? Does *anything* happen? Why/why not? Wanting not just to know *what* preschool physical education looked like, but the reasons *why*, led me to the notion of discourses; I felt that examining the discourses of preschool physical education



would allow me to gain an understanding of the systems of beliefs and values underlying and producing it.

Studying the concept of discourses introduced me to poststructuralism. I had not encountered poststructuralism before, but found I strongly aligned with it. It seemed to ‘fit’ with my beliefs. For instance, its problematisation of dualistic thinking (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007) supported my assertion that preschool ‘physical education’ should not be positioned in opposition to or competition with play. Furthermore, its focus on problematising the workings and effects of discourses and power relations provided a means of theorising my concerns regarding inclusion and listening to the voices of those who may be marginalised. In a similar vein, poststructural perspectives aligned with my belief that education – and thus physical education – should be concerned with encouraging children to ask questions and become critical and sceptical thinkers. A poststructural perspective supports my contention that children should be encouraged “to examine and challenge the status quo, the dominant constructions of reality and the power relations that produce inequalities” (Wright, 2004a, p. 7).

These beliefs will have impacted on the ways in which I conducted the study and interpreted the data, as researchers bring their own “hopes, fears and expectations to the places and objects of [their] research” (MacLure, 2003, p. 17). For instance, my contention that young children should have opportunities to share their views and experiences has meant that generating and analysing children’s talk – as well as adult’s talk – is a significant aspect of this study. Furthermore, my belief that early childhood education can feature both free play and more adult-led ‘physical education’ will have impacted on the ways in which I felt about and therefore interpreted participants’ comments about these issues. Consequently, following Dahlberg *et al.* (2007), I do not suggest that what I write is the ‘truth’ about ‘physical education’ at the three preschools. As Wright (2004b) explains, researchers using poststructural perspectives do not claim to capture ‘truths’; rather, they focus on “how individuals, groups, cultures and institutions construct realities and with what effect” (p. 23).

#### **1.4 Reading the thesis**

The thesis is organised in a ‘traditional’ format and consists of eight chapters. In Chapter Two, I examine previous research related to preschool ‘physical education’. I also explore sociocultural and poststructural scholarship related to early childhood education and physical education. Chapter Three details the theoretical framework underpinning the study. I particularly focus on Foucault’s work around discourses, power and subjectivities. Chapter Four is the methodology chapter, in which I outline the decisions and steps taken regarding data generation and data analysis. In Chapters Five, Six and Seven, I present my findings. Chapter Five features an exploration of the discursive ‘truths’ about ‘physical education’ the participants drew on. It begins with an examination of documentation related to the curriculum used at the settings and to preschool physical education CPD some of the practitioners had experienced. It then features a description of ‘physical education’ at each setting and an overview of the ways in which the participants talked about it. Chapters Six and Seven provide a more in-depth analysis of the ways in which the participants engaged with the discourses identified. Chapter Six focuses on their engagements with developmental discourses. In Chapter Seven, I interrogate their engagements with physical activity and health discourses. In the final chapter, I draw my findings to a conclusion and suggest recommendations for future research and practice.

## **Chapter 2 – Review of Literature**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter examines previous research relevant to the current study. It is comprised of four main sections. As noted in Chapter One, research related to preschool physical education is quite scarce, but an increasing body of research is concerned with preschool physical activity. Therefore, the first section of the chapter concerns research related to physical education and physical activity at preschools. Motor skill development, play, physical activity and health are themes that emerge in this discussion. The chapter then explores the notion of early childhood pedagogy. This section highlights the prevalence of developmental discourses throughout early childhood literature. Consequently, I particularly examine the ‘reconceptualist’ scholarship, which interrogates the dominance of developmental discourses in the early childhood field (Soto & Swadener, 2002). This discussion connects to sociocultural and poststructural work in physical education. Since the current study takes a similar theoretical approach, I examine this physical education scholarship, which includes research in the related areas of physical activity and health.

### **2.2 Physical education and physical activity at preschools**

#### **2.2.1 Preschool physical education**

In this section, I discuss some exceptions to the general observation that research related to preschool physical education is sparse. I begin by discussing studies concerned with preschoolers’ motor skill development.

#### **Motor skill development**

Motor skill development is a regular theme within academic preschool physical education literature. Vives-Rodríguez (2005), for instance, researched the factors that influence preschool movement instruction. The title of her study – ‘Preschool physical education: a case study of the factors that influence movement instruction to preschool children’ – indicates that she uses the terms ‘physical education’ and ‘movement instruction’ interchangeably. She also frequently refers to ‘movement

skill instruction'. Using document analysis, participant observation, and teacher and parent surveys and interviews, Vives-Rodríguez found that the factors that most influenced preschool physical education related to teachers' perceived capability to teach it, and support from management. She infers that teacher training in movement education is a potentially effective means of integrating it into preschool curricula.

Other studies exploring how children's movement education and motor development can be supported were conducted by Zachopoulou, Tsapakidou and Derri (2004), Deli, Bakle and Zachopoulou (2006) and Derri *et al.* (2001). These studies compared the effects of participating in a music and movement programme, a physical education programme, or free play on four- to six-year-olds' fundamental motor skill development. Zachopoulou *et al.* (2004) compared the effects of a 'developmentally appropriate' music and movement programme and a 'developmentally appropriate' physical education programme on children's jumping and dynamic balance. The authors' references to 'developmentally appropriate' programmes illustrate their engagement with developmental discourses. As is discussed later in the chapter, developmental discourses are prevalent throughout early childhood education research and practice. Developmental psychology "seeks to build universally applicable, factual and correct statements about how children develop" (MacNaughton, 2005, p. 23). Zachopoulou *et al.*'s 'developmentally appropriate' programmes would thus have been based on 'knowledge' from developmental psychology about what four- to six-year-olds 'should' and 'should not' be able to do. For 35 to 40 minutes, twice weekly for two months, 50 children followed a music and movement programme, while 40 participated in a physical education programme. Both programmes focused on movement, spatial awareness and exploration (the difference was that there was no music during the physical education programme). Zachopoulou *et al.* found that the children in the music and movement group showed a greater improvement in jumping and balancing than those in the physical education group, and thus conclude that rhythmic activities appear to enhance preschoolers' motor performance.

Deli *et al.* (2006) conducted a similar study, but had a third group of children, who engaged in free play. Deli *et al.* found that, after ten weeks, the children attending the structured programmes significantly improved their motor performances, compared to those in the free play group. They therefore conclude that structured programmes appear to improve children's fundamental motor skill performance. Derri *et al.* (2001), comparing the locomotor skills of children who experienced a ten-week music and movement programme with children who engaged in free play alone, come to a similar conclusion.

Two more papers focusing on young children's motor development in physical education are by Martin, Rudisill and Hastie (2009) and Valentini and Rudisill (2004). These studies investigated the effects of a mastery motivational climate on kindergarten children's motor skill development. Unlike Deli *et al.* (2006) and Derri *et al.* (2001), Martin *et al.* (2009) and Valentini and Rudisill (2004) do not create a binary between play and structured physical education, but position them as potentially more inter-linked. Martin *et al.* (2009) compared the effects on motor skill development of kindergarteners who experienced a direct instructional, teacher-centred physical education intervention, with those who experienced a child-centred, exploratory situation (i.e. mastery climate). Martin *et al.*'s description of lessons with a mastery climate illustrates that the notions of structured physical education and play come together through this concept:

Children entered the classroom and sat in the circle where the teacher explained the different fundamental motor skills stations (i.e., throwing, hopping, kicking) fashioned for that day. Students were then invited to move *freely* throughout the stations during activity time and each station had at least two levels of task difficulty. During this time, students were allowed *choice* in which stations to visit, the length of time they wanted to spend at each one, level of task difficulty, and their partner. (p. 231, emphasis added)

In this extract, notions of freedom and choices are enmeshed with a focus on motor skill development. Thus, while the studies discussed above depict how discourses can sometimes be constructed as oppositional, Martin *et al.*'s paper shows how they can also be positioned as inter-linked. Martin *et al.*'s findings lead them to conclude that a mastery climate can positively impact on motor skill performance. Valentini

and Rudisill (2004), whose research concerned kindergarteners deemed to have developmental delays, similarly found that children who experienced a mastery motivational climate showed significantly better motor skill performance, as well as higher perceived competence, than those who experienced a low-autonomy climate.

Another study concerned with examining the effects of a movement programme on preschoolers' motor skill development was conducted by Robert (1999). As the programme was conducted at the university Robert attended, his study focused not on curricular physical education, but on an extra-curricular programme, which involved parental participation (there was a control group with no parents). Robert found that children in the parent-attended programme showed a greater increase in motor skill and movement concept development than those in the control group. He also found that children whose parents actively taught them did not significantly outperform children whose parents just observed. Another finding was that participation in the programme did not significantly increase the amount of time participants spent engaging in physical activities outside the programme. This final finding links the motor development discourse to a concern with physical activity, indicating that Robert positions movement skills as a foundation for participation in various physical activities.

The studies discussed so far illustrate the prevalence of a movement and motor skill development discourse in preschool physical education research literature. Martin *et al.* (2009) demonstrate the strength of this discourse in their paper by declaring, "One of physical education's unique contributions to the education of all children is motor skill performance. Thus, physical education teachers must create climates that support the learning of movement skills" (p. 237). The words "unique", "all" and "must" indicate that these authors regard motor skill development to be the primary aim of physical education in kindergarten. Aligning with this view, Derri *et al.* (2001) declare motor skill development to be "critical" (p.16) and describe the potential "embarrassment" and "fear" of injury and ridicule that children who "fail to develop these skills" may face if trying to learn them in later life (p. 17). This powerful image of scared, sad children strongly portrays the message that motor skill

development must be prioritised in preschool physical education. The authors' references to benefits of developing motor skills further emphasise this notion:

By developing motor skills...children fulfil their desire for movement, build their bodies, and enhance their attention. In addition, they develop cognition as well as language skills through learning new terms and discussing these during, and after, practice. (Derri *et al.*, 2001, p. 17)

By positioning motor skill development as the source of so many benefits, it is characterised as unquestioningly 'good' and 'imperative' for preschoolers. I discuss later in the chapter, however, how a poststructural research approach questions the "taken-for-grantedness" (Tinning, 2006, p. 372) of this assumption and interrogates the workings and potential effects of this discourse. For instance, the work of Thorpe (2003) and Wright (1997) suggests that the privileging of motor skill development in preschool physical education may not be an unproblematic endeavour, as it may lead to some children being labelled as 'deficient' and thus marginalised.

### Play

Assessing children's motor skills is not the primary focus of the next paper I examine, but similar to some of those discussed above, it is concerned with play. Sanders and Graham (1995) used qualitative methods (observations, interviews with children and teachers) to investigate kindergarteners' initial experiences of physical education. They found that the children demonstrated "a relentless persistence for play" (p. 376), which clashed with the teacher's attempts to give instructions. Sanders and Graham frequently deploy terms such as "natural desire" (p. 373) and "natural tendency" (p. 376, p.378) when describing children's play. For example, they state:

At a basic level, *all* children enjoy play and are *by nature* playful. Play is what young children do when they are not eating, sleeping, or complying with the wishes of adults (Gallahue, 1989). Although play is not likely to become a part of school curricula, one can argue that children come to educational settings with a *natural disposition* to take on early school experiences in a playlike manner. (p. 372, emphasis added)

The words “all”, “by nature” and “natural” imply that young children ‘should’ be engaging in play. This emphasis on what children of a particular age ‘should’ be doing is illustrative of developmental discourses. Sanders and Graham do not appear to consider children’s agency; their use of terms related to ‘nature’ implies that children have no control over their actions.

Sanders and Graham (1995) again draw on developmental discourses when proposing two recommendations based on their findings. Firstly, they advise that teachers must understand pupils’ developmental characteristics and, accordingly, provide appropriate curricula and teaching strategies. While their paper primarily depicts a potential clash between adult-led physical education and child-led play, their second recommendation constructs these notions as more inter-linked:

...movement experiences for young children should stress learning through play. This is not to suggest that children are undirected, but that movement tasks should provide children with opportunities to develop skills in an exploratory, problem-solving, playlike environment. (p. 382)

Like Martin *et al.* (2009) and Valentini and Rudisill (2004), Sanders and Graham (1995) enmesh notions of play with a concern for skill development, again illustrating how discourses often fluidly shift and change throughout the literature, sometimes appearing in competition and at other times inter-linked.

In a similar vein, play both clashes and combines with a physical activity discourse in another study related to preschool physical education. Herskind (2010) investigated Danish kindergarten employees’ experiences of implementing an educational programme entitled ‘Moving Children’, which aimed “to increase the physical activity in children’s daily life” (p. 187). Using interviews and observations, Herskind found that while, at one level, the implementation of the programme was successful (the children became more physically active), the process was rife with tensions and dilemmas. Herskind explains that Danish kindergartens place great emphasis on children’s play and self-governed activities, so “structured play, as opposed to free forms of play, has been perceived as congruent with teaching in an authoritarian manner” (p. 188). She found, therefore, that implementing ‘Moving



Children' required a significant transformation of the participants' practice; as they were "confronted with new standards for kindergarten pedagogy" (p. 197) – and thus found their beliefs being challenged – they were faced with re-negotiating their subjectivities according to a new definition of a 'good' practitioner. Herskind cites Goffman (2005) in interpreting some of the participants' behaviour as "an expression of defence or avoidance of something humiliating" (p. 198). Herskind's study relates to literature concerned with early childhood pedagogy, particularly that which focuses on practitioners' roles and the degree to which they should intervene in or lead activities. This literature is discussed later in the chapter.

Herskind (2010) explains that 'Moving Children' arose from two government policy initiatives, the first of which appeared to legitimate adult-led activities by challenging the "strong affiliation to the concept of 'development' and children's self-governed activities" (p. 189). The second policy was concerned with health promotion:

Another political intervention is the governmental health programme "Life Long Health" (2002). It underlines the importance of the initiation of early interventions in children's institutions to prevent and combat obesity and lifestyle diseases...physical activity and sports are first and foremost considered significant factors in the war against obesity and in the prevention of associated life style diseases. (p. 189)

Herskind explains that she mentions these policies in order to highlight the degree to which kindergartens are influenced by political agendas in which physical education is considered a significant "means to combat illness and obesity" (p. 189). Her paper challenges the seemingly unquestioning 'goodness' of these agendas by illustrating their effects on practitioners' beliefs and practices.

My discussion so far has shown that discourses related to motor skill development and play are particularly prevalent throughout preschool physical education research literature. Concerns with physical activity and health are also evident. Like Herskind (2010), I wonder about possible effects of these discourses. I have noticed that, while

preschool physical education has not been extensively researched, preschool physical activity has received more attention. I now examine this research.

### **2.2.2 Preschool physical activity**

There is an increasing body of research concerned with preschool children's physical activity (e.g. Bower *et al.*, 2008; Cardon *et al.*, 2008; Dowda *et al.*, 2004; Dowda *et al.*, 2009; Hannon & Brown, 2008; Pate *et al.*, 2004; Pate *et al.*, 2008; Reilly *et al.*, 2006; Temple & O'Connor, 2003; Trost *et al.*, 2003; Tucker, 2008; Vale *et al.*, 2010). This research, largely published in scientific and medical journals, mainly involves quantitative investigations of preschoolers' physical activity levels (e.g. using accelerometers and direct observation). It is primarily concerned with health promotion and obesity prevention, as demonstrated by statements such as, "Recent increases in the prevalence of overweight and obesity in preschool and school-age children constitute a significant and growing public health problem" (Dowda *et al.*, 2004, pp. 183-184). The words "increases" and "growing" signify urgency, persuading the reader that research on preschool children's weight and physical activity levels is necessary and justified. Indeed, Cardon *et al.* (2008) explicitly state that "there is an urgent need for effective interventions aimed at increasing physical activity in preschoolers" (p. 6). This "urgent need" is justified by reference to "the childhood obesity epidemic" (p. 5) and the claim that "preschoolers are characterized by low levels of physical activity and high levels of sedentary behaviour" (p. 6). These quotes position physical activity research and practices at preschools as 'good' and 'imperative'. Later in the chapter, I discuss research that problematises the discourse whereby children are positioned as 'couch potatoes' (Gard & Wright, 2005) who require disciplinary bodily practices to rectify their 'unhealthy' behaviours. For now, however, I examine some of the epidemiological research.

Many studies investigate the relationships between early childhood environments and preschoolers' physical activity levels. Bower *et al.* (2008), for instance, assessed childcare settings with regard to physical and social environmental factors related to physical activity behaviour (e.g. equipment, policies, staff behaviours). They found that three- to five-year-olds attending settings with what Bower *et al.* considered to

be supportive environments achieved higher levels of moderate to vigorous physical activity, spent less time in sedentary activities and had higher mean physical activity levels than those attending settings with less supportive environments. These authors suggest that practitioner-led physical activities could enhance childcare programmes and increase children's activity levels. They stress the importance of staff receiving training and support in order to be able to provide rich, active environments.

Numerous other researchers similarly recommend that adults should play proactive roles in children's physical activities. For instance, Cardon *et al.* (2008) propose that practitioners should promote physical activity during break-times. According to these authors, receiving guidance regarding physical activity promotion during their initial training may enable practitioners to promote physical activity and to enter their careers with positive attitudes to it. Tucker (2008), who conducted a review of literature concerned with preschoolers' physical activity levels, similarly advises that practitioners be given support and training to enable them to encourage physical activity.

A study by Temple and O'Connor (2003) demonstrates that this call for increased support and training regarding physical activity may not just be coming from researchers, but from practitioners themselves. Temple and O'Connor investigated environmental and social variables influencing the physical activity behaviours of three- to five-year-olds in long day care centres in Australia. Unlike the previously mentioned studies in this section, their investigation involved both quantitative and qualitative methods. A questionnaire completed by centre co-ordinators revealed that they positioned the availability of space, time, equipment and resources, and staff motivation and support as barriers to physical activity. Focus groups with staff revealed they valued physical activity for young children, but were concerned about their abilities to promote it. They indicated – like the researchers mentioned above – that training related to physical activity would be helpful.

In another study focusing on preschoolers' physical activity levels, Dowda *et al.* (2009) suggest numerous ways practitioners can indirectly encourage physical

activity. These authors recommend providing inexpensive portable equipment, limiting children's access to fixed equipment, limiting the number of children in the playground at a time, and limiting use of electronic media. This final point links to the work of numerous other researchers, which also suggests that the availability of television and other media leads to decreased levels of play and physical activity.

According to Burdette and Whitaker (2005), for instance, children's time is increasingly taken up with "sedentary and passive activities such as watching television, using the computer, and playing videogames" (p. 46). Although acknowledging a lack of research in the area, these authors suggest that another factor that may contribute to young children's (allegedly) declining opportunities for physically active play is increased time spent in structured activities. Early childhood scholar Clements (2004), in a paper concerning outdoor play, makes a similar point. Clements surveyed 830 mothers of children aged three to 12 years and found that 85% believed that today's children spend less time playing outdoors than previous generations. It is important to note that Clements's study is of people's *beliefs* about play and physical activity, rather than actual time spent in these activities. Clements found that 85% of respondents cited children's television viewing and computer game playing as the main reason for their apparent lack of outdoor play. Eighty-two percent referred to crime and safety, while 61% mentioned lack of adult supervision and fear of physical harm to their children.

Numerous other researchers also refer to the impact of increased concerns about safety on children's play and physical activity. Sturgess (2003) maintains that threats and limits to play are increasing in modern society, with parents' fears of traffic, strangers and injury affecting children's opportunities for play. Similarly, Bailey (1999) proposes that parents' concerns about safety affect children's opportunities for physical activity, as children today are less likely to have freedom to participate in unsupervised outdoor activities. He cites various other factors that contribute to (allegedly) declining levels of physical play and physical activity, including changing transport patterns, and electronic media.

As noted, Burdette and Whitaker (2005) similarly report that children's time is increasingly taken up with sedentary activities. These authors suggest that efforts to increase young children's physical activity levels may be more successful if play is promoted "on its traditional merits – that play allows children to experience the joys of movement, creativity, and friendship" (p. 49). Burdette and Whitaker's uncritical promotion of play appears to romanticise it; their argument veers towards what Wood and Attfield (1996) describe as the tendency in the early childhood education field to view play "through rose-tinted glasses" (p. 93). This is discussed later in the chapter.

### Physical play

Burdette and Whitaker's (2005) connection of play and physical activity relates to other research concerned with physical play. In contrast to the epidemiological literature, which often positions preschoolers as inactive and in need of physical activity interventions, some play researchers characterise young children as 'naturally' physically active. For instance, Moyles (2006) asserts that physical learning (e.g. related to balance, agility and coordination) is "inherent in a young child's play" (p. 30). The word "inherent" appears to imply that the desire and ability to be active are innate. Similarly, Bailey (1999), citing the work of Rippe *et al.* (1993), proposes that play may be the most natural way for children to be active, and therefore the most natural way for them to be fit and healthy. The word 'natural' again implies that the desire and ability to play and to be active are innate. Numerous play researchers appear to share this view (e.g. Biber, 1984; Bruce, 2005). I now examine literature specifically concerned with physical play.

Physical play (also known as physical activity play) is defined by Pellegrini, Horvat and Huberty (1998) as "a form of immature and seemingly 'purposeless' behaviour that is physically vigorous and in which children can engage alone or with peers" (p. 1053). Brady *et al.* (2008) describe it as any physical activity where children are "doing what they want to do for their own reasons" (p. 6). Pellegrini *et al.*'s (1998) use of the word "purposeless" and Brady *et al.*'s (2008) description of children's ownership of the play indicate that physical activity play cannot be equated with

more structured physical activities where children are being instructed. It often takes place outdoors and involves large body movements such as running, climbing and swinging (Murphy & Ní Chroinin, 2011). Pellegrini and Blatchford (2003) claim that research shows it may potentially contribute to physical, cognitive and social development.

Pellegrini and Smith (1998b) identify three types of physical activity play:

- Rhythmic stereotypies
- Exercise play
- Rough and tumble play.

These authors draw on developmental discourses by positioning the three types of play as stages children go through at specific ages. They explain that rhythmic stereotypies peak at about six months of age and involve gross motor movements such as rocking and kicking. Exercise play, which Pellegrini and Smith say can start at approximately 12 months of age, is defined as “gross locomotor movements in the context of play” (p. 578). It involves vigorous movements including running and jumping. Pellegrini and Smith explain that exercise play increases during the toddler to preschool period and declines during the primary school years, peaking at approximately four to five years of age.

The third type of physical activity play – rough and tumble play – involves “vigorous behaviors such as wrestling, grappling, kicking, and tumbling that would appear to be aggressive except for the playful context” (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998b, p. 579). Pellegrini and Smith note that while exercise play may or may not involve social interaction, rough and tumble play always does. While it can look like real fighting, children are often laughing, kicks and blows are not hard or do not make contact, and it is usually done with friends (Smith & Pellegrini, 2008). According to Fabes, Hanish and Martin (2003) and Smith, Smees and Pellegrini (2004), boys engage in rough and tumble play more frequently than girls do. Pellegrini and Smith (1998b) make a similar claim, suggesting that causal factors for this could include hormonal differences and socialisation. These authors maintain that rough and tumble play

increases during the preschool and early primary school years, peaking at around eight to ten years of age.

Despite the aforementioned studies, Pellegrini and Smith (1998c) note that throughout the play research, “physical activity play has been woefully neglected” (p. 610). Tannock (2008) set out to redress this issue by investigating rough and tumble play at two early childhood settings. Most of the practitioners who participated in Tannock’s study positioned rough and tumble play as not appropriate in early childhood education settings. Although many spoke of its potential value (including potential physical and social benefits), their frequent references to safety led Tannock to deduce that fear of injury may create “a barrier for adults in fully accepting rough and tumble play” (p. 359). Tannock concludes that the participants expressed a lack of knowledge about how to effectively manage it, thus indicating a need for guidelines about rough and tumble play in early childhood settings.

Tannock’s (2008) point relates to the recommendations of the physical activity researchers discussed earlier, who propose that practitioners have a role to play in providing young children with opportunities for physical activity. Concurring with this view, early childhood scholar Eastman (1997) maintains that practitioners are “in a unique position to support and encourage an active lifestyle among very young children” (p. 161). Murata and Maeda (2002) also accentuate the role of early childhood practitioners in young children’s physical education, but they focus more on motor skill development than physical activity. These authors explain that the view that motor skill development occurs primarily because of maturation is inaccurate; rather, preschoolers “need some guidance to improve their physical abilities” (p. 238). They propose that while free play can provide opportunities to practise new skills, instructed physical education should be regarded as an important element of early childhood education. Furthermore, they assert that preschool physical education “is not free play where teachers stand back...teachers should provide cues, feedback, or help as needed” (p. 238). Zachopoulou *et al.* (2010) similarly stress that in order to maximise learning, practitioners should not just take “a backseat role” (p. 1).

Discourses related to motor skill development, play, physical activity and health are prevalent throughout research literature related to physical education and physical activity at preschools. While the latter appears to have received more attention from scholars, research associated with both notions advocates for a proactive (rather than passive) role for practitioners. In light of these references to practitioners' roles, it is important to examine research concerned with early childhood pedagogy more generally. I now focus on this literature.

## **2.3 Early childhood pedagogy**

### **2.3.1 Definitions of pedagogy**

Watkins and Mortimore (1999) define pedagogy as “any conscious activity by one person designed to enhance learning in another” (p. 3). Early childhood scholars Moyles, Adams and Musgrove (2002a) characterise pedagogy as more than the *practice* of teaching, but also the “principles, theories, perceptions and challenges that inform and shape it” (p. 5). Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2002) propose that, when defining early childhood pedagogy, it is important to refer to the provision of learning environments for play and exploration. These authors claim that pedagogy is often defined broadly, which can be problematic and lead to the words ‘pedagogy’ and ‘curriculum’ being used interchangeably. Siraj-Blatchford and Wong (1999) differentiate the two by defining curriculum as “the educational plans and learning effects of early years settings” and pedagogy as “the particular selection of educational practices and techniques that are applied to realise the curriculum” (p. 8). Some physical education scholars prefer not to separate the notions of pedagogy and curriculum (e.g. Kirk, Macdonald & O’Sullivan, 2006; Tinning, 2008). However, Siraj-Blatchford and Wong (1999) maintain that distinguishing between them may be useful with regard to early childhood education, as many countries do not have specific preschool curricula that practitioners are required to follow. Therefore, when defining and evaluating quality early childhood education, conceptualising pedagogy and curriculum separately can be helpful as it allows for acknowledgement that what children learn may vary across different settings and cultures.



These authors are not alone in emphasising the influence of culture on early childhood curriculum and pedagogy. Stephen (2006), for instance, explains that the ways in which different societies view children, childhood and learning will impinge on the educational experiences offered. Regarding individual practitioners, Moyles *et al.* (2002a) emphasise the significance of culture by stating that pedagogy “connects the relatively self-contained act of teaching...with personal, cultural and community values” (p. 5). Pedagogy is thus not a fixed or static notion; it is a collaborative, adaptable, evolving process (Scottish Executive, 2005). As Moyles (2006) observes, no single teaching or learning style will suit all situations, practitioners and children.

With specific regard to defining early childhood pedagogy, Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2002) suggest that the word ‘teaching’ may be unhelpful. Indeed, Siraj-Blatchford (2005) begins a paper entitled ‘Quality Teaching in the Early Years’ by acknowledging that “many readers may find the title of this chapter something of a problem in itself” (p. 137). Moyles *et al.* (2002b) explain that words like ‘pedagogy’ and ‘teach’ produced various responses, including embarrassment and discomfort, in the early childhood practitioners who participated in their research. These authors suggest that this is because early childhood practitioners believe “they support children’s development within an enabling, facilitating and observing role rather than directly as ‘teachers’” (p. 13). Similarly, Stephen (2005) notes that discussions about ‘teaching’ are resisted in preschool provision in Scotland, as ‘teaching’ tends to be perceived as a didactic concept. It appears that concepts deemed didactic would contrast with many widely accepted principles of early childhood pedagogy.

### **2.3.2 Principles of early childhood pedagogy**

According to Marsden and Weston (2007), there is general agreement across the field that early childhood education “should be child-centred, both active and interactive and reflect the social world of the child” (p. 386). Jalongo *et al.* (2004), examining early childhood education internationally, note that desired outcomes “are universally the full development of the child that leads to later school success and competence in adult life” (p. 144). This statement illustrates the prevalence of

developmental discourses, elucidating the notion that children are adults-in-training (Sorin, 2005).

Reviewing early childhood education in 20 countries, Stephen (2006) identifies a number of underlying principles common to early childhood education in Europe and North America, regardless of type of setting or particular pedagogy adopted. The factors include a focus on: individual development; play; child-initiated learning; co-construction of learning; children as active agents and competent learners; listening to and respecting children; and context and community. Despite the apparent ‘universality’ of these factors, I discuss later in the chapter how uncritical emphasis on concepts such as play can be problematic (e.g. they can be difficult to implement in practice).

Reviewing five models of early childhood education that are commonly promoted around the world (Italy’s *Reggio Emilia*; *High/Scope* from the USA; Portugal’s *Movimento da Escola Moderna*; New Zealand’s *Te Whariki*; *Quality in Diversity* from the UK), Siraj-Blatchford (1999) identifies three pedagogical principles common to each model:

- Instructional techniques (including creating learning environments, direct instruction and scaffolding)
- Encouraging involvement (to promote intrinsic motivation and foster improved learning dispositions, such as perseverance)
- Fostering engagement (by paying attention to children’s individual differences and viewing them as active learners).

Overall, the principles appear to align with those identified by the researchers in the discussion above, yet the first principle demonstrates that there is a place for direct instruction in these models. As alluded to earlier, when referring to the use of words such as ‘pedagogy’ and ‘teaching’ with early childhood practitioners, the role of the adult in early childhood education appears to be a somewhat contentious issue. Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2002) explain that “different early years practices are informed by different educational philosophies and values and by the different assumptions that are held about learning, child development, appropriate styles of instruction, and

curricula” (p. 28). Similarly, both Moyles *et al.* (2002b) and Siraj-Blatchford (1999) propose that because practitioners come from diverse backgrounds regarding training and qualifications, they may have different ideas about pedagogy. Despite these different ideas practitioners may have, a common thread runs through this and the preceding two paragraphs – the influence of developmental psychology.

## **2.4 Developmental psychology**

### **2.4.1 Introduction**

The discussion above reveals the dominance of developmental psychology in early childhood education. For instance, Jalongo *et al.* 's (2004) reference to “full development” (p. 144), Stephen's (2006) point about individual development, and Siraj-Blatchford's (1999) mention of active learners are all evidence of the influence of developmental psychology. As noted earlier, similar statements are evident throughout the literature related to preschool physical education (e.g. Zachopoulou *et al.* 's (2004) references to ‘developmentally appropriate’ programmes).

Developmentalism is a term used to refer to these types of statements and the assumptions underpinning them (Burrows, 2004).

Developmental psychology is concerned with determining ‘truths’ about how children develop (MacNaughton, 2005). Developmental theories are based on the premise that development is universal and that children's abilities gradually increase and become more sophisticated as they get older and nearer adulthood (Paradice, 1999). Developmental psychology has come to play a dominant role in pedagogical practice (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007). As Walkerdine (1998) observes, “the common sense of child development...is everywhere [in education], in apparatuses from teacher-training, to work-cards, to classroom layout” (p. 162). The dominance of developmental psychology, particularly because of ‘Developmentally Appropriate Practice’ (DAP) (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997), which Ailwood (2003a) describes as “a kind of pedagogical and curricular incarnation of developmental psychology” (p. 69), is such that it has been difficult to think about young children from outside of it (Prout & James, 1997). DAP was published in the USA through the National Association for the Education of Young Children

(NAEYC) and rapidly became the foundation of early childhood education across many western<sup>6</sup> countries (Ailwood, 2003a). This has contributed to developmental psychology becoming normalised and taken for granted (Fleer, 2005); Burman (2008) declares its effects to be “so great that they are often almost imperceptible, taken-for-granted features about our expectations of ourselves, others, parents, children and families” (p. 2).

Originating in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, developmental psychology is paradigmatically a modernist discipline (Burman, 2008). It grew out of the ‘child study’ movement, which was concerned with gathering ‘objective’ observations of individual children (Burman, 2008), and draws on biological discourses of development (Ailwood, 2003a). Lubeck (1996) observes that the work of Jean Piaget (1896-1980) in particular “has had an unprecedented influence on the field of early childhood education” (p. 154). Burman (2008), highlighting that it is not just the early childhood education field that has been influenced by Piaget’s work, claims that “no nurse, social worker, counsellor or teacher will complete her training without learning about Piaget’s stage model of cognitive development” (p. 241). She notes that, for professionals, despite both increasing interest in Vygotsky’s work and an academic context that mostly downplays Piaget’s significance, it is Piaget who is most often associated with developmental psychology. Robinson and Jones Díaz (2006) maintain that Piaget’s work, in which children’s development is viewed as “a biologically predetermined, clearly articulated, linear process towards becoming adults” (p. 6), has dominated understandings of childhood and children’s learning. According to Piaget’s theory, all children proceed through this process, reaching cognitive developmental stages that correlate with their ages (Robinson & Jones Díaz, 2006). Developmental assumptions thus influence people’s views of what children (and adults) can and cannot do at particular ages (Burrows, 2004).

Piaget’s model foregrounds the notion of active learning; the child is depicted as a scientist who systematically encounters and solves problems, learning by activity and discovery (Burman, 2008). The Scottish Executive (2007) connects active learning to

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<sup>6</sup> By ‘western’, I mean the societies of Western Europe, and those of European origin (e.g. North America, Australasia).

concepts including play, exploration, child-centredness and fun. Activity, experience and play became linked together because of the view that “scientific rationality grew out of play-like (because spontaneous) exploration of objects” (Walkerdine, 1998, p. 180). Play is privileged in developmental psychology (Burrows & Wright, 2001). Indeed, there is a wealth of literature dedicated to the (alleged) link between play and child development. According to Jones, Hodson and Napier (2005), Piaget’s work “gave play, particularly in the early years, its distinctive authority as a basis for the evolution of learning” (p. 44). It is so widely viewed as significant to early childhood education that it is at the point of being a cliché (Ailwood, 2003a). Wood (2007a) explains that “child-centred education reified the role and value of play in children’s learning and development” (p. 124). MacNaughton (1997) cites the work of a number of feminist poststructuralists who have claimed that reliance on modernist developmental psychology has led to the dominance of child-centred pedagogies in early childhood education. As Dahlberg *et al.* (2007) explain, “child-centred pedagogy...has grown out from developmental psychology” (p. 37). Walkerdine (1998) observes that the work of Maria Montessori, Susan Isaacs and particularly Piaget was influential to the emergence of what she terms “individualized pedagogy” (p. 177). I now examine play and child-centredness in more detail.

### **2.4.2 Play**

Play has been a common thread running through the diverse work which has influenced early childhood education since the 1700s (Ailwood, 2003a). Particularly influential figures include Froebel (who founded the kindergarten movement and positioned play as the work of the child), Piaget, Vygotsky and Dewey. Wood (2005) describes the role of play in learning and development as “one of the fundamental principles in early childhood pedagogy” (p. 19). Plowman and Stephen (2005) illustrate the emphasis placed on play by claiming that it is the primary vehicle for learning in preschool education in Scotland. Indeed, the Scottish Government (2008) stresses that play is essential to ensuring that children will “have the best start in life and be ready to succeed as adults” (p. 30). Illustrating the link to developmental psychology, Jalongo *et al.* (2004) stress that practitioners must ensure that young children’s learning experiences reflect the ‘fact’ that they learn in a playful, rather

than rigid, way. Sturges (2003) explains that because of the view that play provides children with opportunities to both *learn* and *practise* skills, “play and learning have been intertwined by theoreticians” (p. 106). Moyles *et al.* (2002a) observe “a common commitment to playful pedagogy” (p. 117) across early childhood literature, while Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2002) also note a general consensus that education in the early years should be play-based. Since play is mentioned so frequently throughout early childhood literature, it is vital to ask: what is play?

Play researchers are constantly challenged by “the fuzziness of the concept and the lack of a precise behavioral definition” (Fein, 1981, p. 1095). Powell (2009) declares that “play is notoriously difficult to define” (p. 29). McCune (1998) proposes that this is because play “rarely occurs in isolation” (p. 601); rather than being one particular type of activity, it tends to be an element of many activities. Hall and Abbott (1998) suggest that the difficulty in finding a precise definition of play may be a good thing, as defining something too rigidly may lead to related notions being overlooked. Moyles (2006) similarly proposes that defining play can suggest it is quantifiable, whereas it “*must* be viewed as a process” (p. 11, emphasis in original). She suggests that because processes are dependent on many variables, “a satisfactory definition will be elusive” (p. 11). However, this author, along with numerous others, has attempted to provide a definition for play.

Defining play as “a means by which humans and animals explore a variety of experiences in different situations for diverse purposes”, Moyles (2006, p. ix) indicates that play is not confined to humans. Many definitions refer specifically to children’s play. For example, Burdette and Whitaker (2005) propose that “play is the spontaneous activity in which children engage to amuse and to occupy themselves” (p. 46). The word “spontaneous” indicates that these authors believe play should be initiated by the child, while their definition also demonstrates that it should be enjoyable. Another definition is provided by Biber (1984), who states that “play is the young child’s way of satisfying the basic impulse to experiment and explore...and to rehearse” (p. 191). Biber positions the functions of children’s play as finding out about the world and practising and preparing for future life. The word

“impulse” implies that she regards play as innate. Bruce (2005) similarly claims that “children have a biological predisposition to play” (p. 8). She advises, however, that while children may be born with a biological urge and potential ability to play, not all children will play, as it is triggered by people. This point highlights the importance of adults’ roles in children’s play, a topic explored later in the chapter.

Some researchers cite characteristics of play in order to overcome the difficulty of defining it. Rieber (1996), for instance, lists the following attributes of play:

- It is usually voluntary
- It is intrinsically motivating (pleasurable for its own sake and not dependent on external rewards)
- It involves active engagement
- It has a make-believe quality.

Garvey (1991, cited in Sayeed & Guerin, 2000, pp. 5-6) proposes similar characteristics, excluding the fourth one above and including the following two:

- It is pleasurable and enjoyable
- It has connections with non-play characteristics such as creativity, problem solving, language learning and the development of social roles.

Rickard *et al.* (1995) define a play approach to learning as a process that is:

- Intrinsically motivated
- Enjoyable
- Freely chosen
- Nonliteral
- Safe
- Actively engaged in.

Numerous others cite similar characteristics to those proposed above (e.g. Bruce, 2005; Powell, 2009; Sturges, 2003; Wood & Attfield, 1996). Both Rickard *et al.* (1995) and Garvey (1991, cited in Sayeed & Guerin, 2000, pp. 5-6) position play as a contributor to learning and development. Similarly, Moyles’s (1998) definition of play, in which she proposes that play “appears to be the engagement of people in a variety of activities over which they have ownership and which motivates them to persist towards new learning” (p. 22), demonstrates that she too connects play with

learning and development. As noted earlier, these authors are not alone in holding this view, as many scholars claim there is a link between play and child development.

All the definitions and characteristics of play discussed above are adults' constructions. Howard, Jenvey and Hill (2006) and Howard (2002a) maintain that while scholars have spent much time deliberating about definitions of play, literature that considers the child's perspective is lacking. I have, however, sourced some studies that investigated children's meanings of play.

To investigate if young children could distinguish between play and non-play, Howard (2002b) asked 111 three- to six-year-olds to sort a selection of photographic stimuli. She found that they distinguished between play and work, and learning and not learning. In a similar study with 92 four- to six-year-olds, Howard *et al.* (2006) found that the children associated teacher absence with play, and linked play with the presence of peers. A third study I sourced was conducted by Robson (1993), who held conversations with young children about play, work and learning. She found that they characterised play as a social activity unrelated to learning, and work as related to teacher-initiated tasks. Hyvönen and Juujärvi (2004) sought six- and seven-year-olds' views of playful environments and concluded that the ideal play environment is challenging, allowing children to explore and have adventures that test their cognitive, emotional, social and physical abilities. In a study with children aged six to 12, Jenvey and Jenvey (2002) investigated children's evaluations of the features and motivational aspects of play. The children identified positive feelings, non-literality and use of toys as features of play, while motivational aspects they talked about included practise, communication, intimacy and alleviation of boredom. Carroll (2002) asked children who had experienced play therapy to share their opinions on the experience. She found that while therapists ascribe meaning to play, most children just see it as fun. This finding highlights a major difference between adults' and children's views of play. Similarly, Ceglowski (1997), reviewing research on the differences between children's and teachers' views of play, found that while teachers believed some academic work presented as games was play,



children viewed choice and self-direction as play's key elements. These studies demonstrate that research has shown children's and adults' views of play to differ quite significantly. It seems that while practitioners may construct play as related to learning and development, children view it as separate from learning and 'work'. Since my study similarly focuses on both children's and practitioners' talk, it investigates if children and adults characterise notions such as physical education and play in similar or different ways.

Related to the notion of play in early childhood education is an emphasis on child-centred pedagogy. Child-centredness is promoted, perhaps reified, in much of the literature concerned with both early childhood pedagogy and physical education pedagogy. I now examine this notion in more detail.

#### **2.4.3 Child-centred pedagogy**

As well as foregrounding active learning, play and exploration, Piaget's scholarship is associated with child-centred approaches to education (Burman, 2008). Other educationalists whose work promotes child-centredness include Froebel, Montessori and Dewey. Burman (2008) outlines five central tenets of child-centred pedagogy: children's readiness, choices, needs, play and discovery. Baker (1998) maintains that "a certain ambivalence surrounding child-centeredness...has protected it from being critiqued" (p. 173). She explains that because it is seen to rescue children, to have sympathy with them, and to be more democratic than authoritarian teaching, "the celebratory air surrounding its deployment in education has been pervasive and difficult to contest" (p. 155). It seems, however, that in practice, child-centredness is "abstract and rather problematic" (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007, p. 43).

Burman (2008) outlines numerous difficulties that emerge in translating child-centredness into practice. Firstly, practitioners face a dilemma regarding "the mandate for non-interference to promote independence, and [their] institutional position as responsible for children's learning" (p. 264). Secondly, the conceptual incoherence of a child-centred approach means it "dissolves into intuitions, [and] ad hoc judgements" (p. 265). Burman proposes that this can lead to practitioners'

authority and efficacy being undermined, and to inequality. In her view, child-centredness operates on the assumption that children have equal access to educational opportunities and it ignores educational settings' roles in perpetuating norms and values which privilege middle-class children. Child-centred pedagogy, therefore, "confirms social privileges and pathologises those who are already socially disadvantaged" (p. 262).

Child-centred pedagogy's focus on the individual, which aligns with the neoliberal concern with producing rational, responsible, self-managing individuals (Macdonald, 2011), can be problematic in numerous other ways. Burman (2008) maintains that while it may be associated with fostering positive characteristics such as self-reliance, self-improvement and independence of thought, it may also promote self-interest and competition. She claims that "child-centred pedagogy subscribes to a naturalised, individualised model of childhood" (pp. 261-262). Dahlberg *et al.* (2007) similarly suggest that it depicts a "modernist understanding of the child, as a unified, reified and essentialized subject – at the centre of the world – that can be viewed and treated apart from relationships and context" (p. 43). Fler (2003b) argues that this means child-centredness places children "in an artificial world – one geared to their needs, where they are central, but separated from the real world" (p. 66). She cites the work of Rogoff (1990) in explaining that child-centred approaches to early childhood education in western communities contrast strongly with what happens in some other cultures, where children are included in the daily practices of the real, 'adult' world. According to Fler (2003b), "these communities do not have the need to artificially centre the child to give importance to their [sic] role in the community" (p. 67). This notion aligns with Dahlberg *et al.*'s (2007) assertion that, in contrast to the modernist connotations of child-centredness, a postmodern perspective "would *decentre* the child, viewing the child as existing through its relations with others and always in a particular context" (p. 43, emphasis in original).

#### **2.4.4 Play, child-centredness and practitioners' roles**

As noted, one concern about child-centredness is that it can cause dilemmas for practitioners regarding the degree to which they should intervene in children's

activities. By foregrounding notions related to individualism, practitioners may feel they should not ‘interrupt’ children’s activities and therefore should play passive roles. They may similarly feel they should not intervene in children’s play since, as noted above, defining characteristics of play are that it is voluntary and intrinsically motivated. Many researchers, however, advocate for active, rather than passive, roles for early childhood practitioners.

Both Wood and Attfield (1996) and Moyles (2006), for instance, maintain that adult intervention can enrich and enhance children’s play. The Scottish Executive (2007) similarly advises that play provides practitioners with opportunities to observe children’s learning and potentially take it forward through intervention. Smith (2000) elaborates on this point, claiming that play can become repetitive, but that adult intervention can encourage and challenge children to play in more developed and mature ways. Wood (2005) notes that a common feature of contemporary early childhood curriculum models (e.g. *Reggio Emilia* and *Te Whariki*) is that “learning through play is not left to chance” (p. 20), but influenced and enriched through guidance and interaction. Moyles *et al.* (2002a) similarly declare that “provision alone, ‘providing opportunities’ does not automatically promote learning or development” (p. 111). Furthermore, Smith (2000) cautions that play is not the only medium for child development; he advises that non-play activities (e.g. structured games, story-telling) can also enhance development. Moyles (2006) similarly states that “children can and do learn in other ways than through play” (p. 24), while Wood and Attfield (1996) warn against assuming that play is the only valuable means of learning in early childhood. Indeed, Wood and Bennett (2000), investigating how practitioners change their theories and practice, found that while many play contexts they researched were engaging for children, there was not always any learning taking place.

Similarly, Ailwood (2003b) refers to numerous studies that report that play in early childhood settings can be repetitive, isolating and recreational rather than educational, with practitioners’ roles reduced to monitoring and cleaning. Trawick-Smith (1989) recalls visiting settings where the notion that children learn through

play was used to justify what he calls “*laissez faire* teaching, or the “sit back with your coffee and wait for development to occur” mode of caregiving” (p. 161, emphasis in original). With the emphasis across play literature that it should be voluntary and intrinsically motivated, it is perhaps understandable that practitioners might be disinclined to intervene. Moyles (2006) sympathises with practitioners, whom she feels face a dilemma, being told on the one hand that children learn little without adult direction, and on the other that play must be self-initiated (Tamburrini, 1982, cited in Moyles, 2006). Wood and Attfield (1996) also write of this dilemma, claiming it “provokes heated debate amongst practitioners” (p. 99), as does Wood (2007b), who recognises that practitioners “are caught between contrasting perspectives” (p. 316). As discussed earlier, the practitioners in Herskind’s (2010) study experienced such difficulties when charged with implementing a structured physical activity programme in a context where play was strongly valued.

It seems, however, that evidence to support the high regard play is often held in is lacking. Ailwood (2003b) cites numerous researchers who report that there is little empirical evidence to support the “pedagogical value placed on play in early childhood education” (p. 291). Pellegrini and Blatchford (2003) observe that there is widespread debate about the extent of play’s benefits, while Moyles *et al.* (2002a) note that while play has been promoted by theorists as central to learning and development, its relationship “to pedagogy is not straightforward” (p. 117). Pellegrini and Smith (1998a) call for further research on the potential link between play and child development, describing it as “a controversial and unresolved topic” (p. 55).

Wood and Attfield (1996) contend that looking at play from a critical perspective is a good thing, because – as noted earlier – across the early childhood education field, there can be a tendency to view “play through rose-tinted glasses” (p. 93). These authors maintain that critically examining play encourages practitioners to ask questions, rather than proceed according to assumptions. Similarly, Wood (2007b) warns against romanticising “the power and potential of play” (p. 312). She outlines four potential problems with a play-based curriculum:

- Play is not the only means of learning in early childhood and may not always be the most appropriate way of learning
- Children do not always choose activities that can be classified as play
- The idea that curriculum content arises from children's needs and interests can be problematic in practice
- Play can sometimes involve quite complex skills and processes, which may lead to some children being excluded.

Wood (2007b) argues that there is a need to identify what constitutes high quality play. Pascal and Bertram (2000) similarly declare that providing children with “*quality* play experiences is a challenge which all early childhood educators must address” (p. 161, emphasis added). Proposing a ‘Model for Evaluating and Improving Play’, these authors show that they believe adults have significant roles in children’s play at early childhood education settings. They thus appear to align with Smith (1993), who, proposing a framework based on Vygotsky’s work, opposes a “free play curriculum and suggests that teachers need to take an active role in stimulating learning” (p. 59).

The work of different theorists will have different implications for practice, as their various views on learning and development will impinge on practitioners’ ideas about pedagogy (Moyles *et al.*, 2002a). Citing the work of theorists who have influenced early childhood education (e.g. Froëbel, Isaacs, Montessori, Vygotsky), Moyles *et al.* (2002a) discuss how practitioners at different settings will have different ideas about the role of the practitioner. For instance, while Isaacs sees the practitioner’s role as “somewhat passive, providing an appropriate environment, with little adult intervention” (Moyles *et al.*, 2002a, p. 116), Vygotsky believes the adult has a more prominent role to play.

Vygotsky’s work has received attention in developmental psychology because of “increasing recognition of the abstracted and asocial character of Piaget’s model” (Burman, 2008, p. 188). Referring to early childhood education, Edwards (2003) notes that critique of the dominance of Piaget’s work and continued investigation into development and learning has led to greater emphasis on the “sociocultural

nature of development, with work by Vygotsky (and later Rogoff) serving to inform theoretical debate and discussion” (p. 262).

Vygotsky (1978) proposes that learning is a social process; children need to interact with other people in order for their learning to progress. He proposes that a child has a certain level of ability in a skill, which he or she can perform without assistance. He terms this the *actual development level*. With assistance, this ability can be extended so that something more difficult can be attempted (the *level of potential development*). The distance between these two levels is what Vygotsky terms the *zone of proximal development*. This is the area where adult assistance will best support the child’s learning and development. Bruner (1975) advanced Vygotsky’s ideas and introduced the notion of scaffolding (Soto & Swadener, 2002). Smith (2000) explains how Bruner compares the development of a child to the construction of a building. The scaffolding on a building helps to gradually construct it, growing as the building gets higher, until it can eventually be taken away. In the same way, the assistance, or scaffolding, of an adult can support the development of a child.

It is not difficult to see that, as Moyles *et al.* (2002a) propose, the work of different theorists will impinge on practitioners’ ideas about pedagogy and thus about their roles. Stephen (2006), however, highlighting avenues for future research, observes that there is little evidence to suggest that any one pedagogical approach is superior to the rest. She notes, however, that there is widespread agreement across the field that education in the early years, while respecting children’s ability to self-motivate and self-direct, should value interactions between children and adults as imperative to learning.

Like numerous researchers referred to earlier, Siraj-Blatchford (2005) acknowledges that despite discrepancy regarding the role of the adult, there is general agreement across western society that early childhood education should be play-based. However, she argues that teaching “is implicit in pedagogy” and “should be as much the concern of those working in early childhood settings as it is any other educational sector” (p. 137). Although calling for teaching to be recognised and valued “as

central to quality early childhood education” (p. 147), she is not recommending a completely adult-directed approach. Rather, Siraj-Blatchford proposes a move away from “polarities of approach towards the acceptance of a balanced curriculum and pedagogic framework that includes aspects of...open framework, child-centred and programmed approaches” (p. 147). Wood (2007b) similarly recommends a balanced, integrated pedagogical approach. She acknowledges the challenge of implementing an integrated approach, recognising that such approaches are “more demanding in terms of professional knowledge and expertise than either a laissez-faire approach, or...direct instructional strategies” (p. 314). Similarly, in an earlier paper, Wood (2005) writes that both achieving the right balance between teacher-directed and child-initiated activities, and interacting with children during play, require high levels of skill. She observes, therefore, that “achieving good quality play in practice remains a considerable challenge” (p. 21).

Perhaps Moyles’s (2006) proposal that play *in* the classroom should be regarded differently to play *outside* the classroom may provide a means of resolving some of the conflicts and dilemmas regarding the role of the adult, by promoting a compromise. Explaining that “play in school is and should be very different from play in the home” (p. 170), Moyles argues that in the classroom, the adult should have a significant role in children’s play. Simultaneously, she acknowledges the importance of free play, recognising that there are times when intervention is neither necessary nor desirable.

In conclusion, despite some dissent regarding the role of the adult, it appears from the literature that early childhood pedagogy should incorporate elements of both play and more structured activities. Play and child-centredness are major, inter-related themes of early childhood education, and the emphasis placed on them throughout the literature demonstrates the influence of developmental psychology. Much of the research discussed demonstrates a taken-for-granted view that play and child-centredness are important for learning and development. However, some researchers have critiqued these notions, illustrating that while developmental psychology

remains dominant, the traditional foundations of early childhood education are shifting to make room for poststructural perspectives (Yelland & Kilderry, 2008a).

#### **2.4.5 The reconceptualisation of early childhood education**

According to Cannella (2008), since 1990, and particularly since 2000, a significant body of research has emerged that “challenges truth orientations, turns the ‘world upside down’, and reexamines notions of diversity, equity, and power in the conceptualization of child, family, and notions of care and education” (p. 17). This movement, known as the reconceptualisation of early childhood education, is taking place from a variety of perspectives, and includes critical and postmodern work on changing notions of childhood, identities, gender and sexuality, and social justice (Yelland & Kilderry, 2008a). Cannella (2000) explains that reconceptualisation is “multidirectional and multidimensional, resulting in constant critique and new insights from which new transformative actions can emerge” (p. 216).

Reconceptualist scholars have shown how early childhood education has been influenced, and indeed dominated, by science, psychology and child development theory (Soto & Swadener, 2002). Their focus is to “disentangle the stranglehold of developmental psychology upon [early childhood] curriculum and pedagogy” (Ailwood, 2003a, p. 76). Research attempting to reconceptualise early childhood education, demonstrating the postmodern problematisation of dualistic thinking, moves away from discussions that manifest binaries, such as developmentally appropriate versus inappropriate, or normal versus abnormal (Yelland & Kilderry, 2008a). Reconceptualist scholars take account of alternative perspectives, ask difficult and previously overlooked questions, integrate multiple voices, and attempt to gain a better understanding of the complexities and socially and culturally constructed aspects of childhood (Soto & Swadener, 2002).

Recent critical, sociological and poststructuralist work has questioned the notion of predetermined, universal childhoods that require particular forms of educational experience determined by scientific discovery and people who are older (Cannella, 1999). Robinson and Jones Díaz (2006) explain that poststructural perspectives “disrupt and challenge modernist humanist perspectives of the universal child” (p. 6).



Rather than viewing childhood as an innate phase in human development, universally experienced by all, it is viewed “as a social construction – a social process in which understandings of what it means to be a child are constituted within the historical and cultural discourses available” (Robinson & Jones Díaz, 2006, p. 6). These authors explain that, in recent times, child development theories, such as Piaget’s and Vygotsky’s, have been criticised for a number of reasons.

#### **2.4.6 Criticisms of developmental theories and discourses**

Robinson and Jones Díaz (2006) cite the work of numerous researchers in proposing the following reasons for this recent critique of developmental psychology theories:

- They assume biologically determined universalism
- They generalise from small groups to all children
- Their linearity
- Their failure to recognise the importance of sociocultural factors and other issues such as gender, ethnicity and historical contexts
- Their categorisation of behaviours within ‘ages’ and ‘stages’, which reinforces normative understandings about children’s developmental pathways.

It is important to note that, according to Wertsch (1991, cited in Burman, 2008), while Vygotsky emphasises the social context in which learning takes place, his work features “precious little mention of broader historical, institutional, or cultural processes” (p. 190). Vygotsky also retains a commitment to developmental tenets such as progression from lower to higher functions (Burrows, 1999).

A major reason why developmental theories are problematic is their assumption of universality. They therefore provide the benchmark upon which children are compared (Fleer, 2006). Dahlberg *et al.* (2007) explain that developmental theories promote simple mappings of children’s lives, general classifications of what children of particular ages are like. These maps, classifications and categories ignore the richness and complexity of children’s lives and experiences; “all we know is how far this or that child conforms to certain norms inscribed on the maps we use” (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007, p. 36). Such classifications can have negative consequences for children and their parents. For instance, they may lead parents to worry about their children’s

progress or to become competitive with other parents by comparing children in such a way that development becomes a race (Burman, 2008), in which there will inevitably be ‘winners’ and ‘losers’.

Mapping expectations for development in a simple, linear way, and thus ignoring the complexity of children’s lives, means development is regarded as an individualist, isolated activity; the child is alone with the task of development, abstracted from context (Burman, 2001). What is considered to be ‘normal’ development varies, however, as what is viewed as a ‘normal’ childhood is culturally and temporally specific (Baker, 1995). Developmental milestones are thus social and cultural constructions, rather than scientific ‘truths’ (Burrows, 2004). Fler (2003b) observes that what has come to be valued within the field of early childhood education is essentially a western view of childhood, and therefore of child development. The child upon which this developmental trajectory is based is white, western, middle-class and male (Burman, 2001; Paradise, 1999; Robinson, 2008). Such views of child development are ethnocentric and culture-blind (Burman, 2008); one culture is privileged, while others are silenced (Fler, 2006). Many children are therefore marginalised; they are identified as ‘others’ and deemed to be in need of reform or remedial assistance (Burrows, 1999). In this way, developmental discourses can be seen to be productive and regulatory. Differences (related to culture, class and gender) are repressed as only a single path to maturity is allowed (Burman, 1994). Woodhead (1999) explains why this is problematic by pointing out that the majority of research into early child development and education has been conducted in a narrow socio-economic and cultural context – mainly Europe and North America, which between them constitute only 17% of the world’s population (Penn, 1998, cited in Woodhead, 1999). When features identified by this research are interpreted as universal, “other people’s childhoods too readily become labelled as deprived, deficient and damaging” (Woodhead, 1999, pp. 12-13).

A further reason why developmental theories are problematic is that they promote the notion that children are merely adults-in-training (Sorin, 2005). As Mayall (2002) observes, developmental psychology is “future-oriented; it wants to know how small

people become big people” (p. 22). Viewing childhood as purely practice for adulthood (Sorin, 2005) means that children are regarded to be “in a state of *becoming* rather than *being*” (Woodrow & Press, 2007, p. 316, emphasis in original). Implicit in this notion are the ideas that children are not yet competent, that life happens later, and that children do not have agency (Woodrow & Press, 2007). The focus is on children’s (adult-defined) ‘needs’, rather than their rights (Burman, 2008). This dividing boundary between childhood and adulthood positions children as “innocent...vulnerable and in need of protection” (Robinson, 2008, p. 116). Robinson (2008) describes how this can lead to moral panics about young children’s exposure to knowledge that is deemed to be inappropriate and a threat to their naivete and innocence (e.g. knowledge related to sexuality); childhood thus becomes increasingly ‘watched’ and regulated. This again illustrates that developmental discourses can be productive and regulatory. The current study opposes the notions that children are ‘incompetent’ and ‘innocent’ by seeking children’s, as well as adults’, perspectives and regarding both sets of views to be equally important. Incorporating children’s perspectives in this way is “a means of both illustrating and enacting children’s agency” (Woodrow & Press, 2007, p. 322).

I have mentioned that developmental discourses are regulatory and productive; they provide practitioners with sets of ‘truths’ about what children ‘should’ and ‘should not’ do during early childhood. This regulation, and thus the operation of developmental discourses, is reliant on practitioners using a particular pedagogical technique – observation. The major theorists of early childhood education, as well as textbooks related to early childhood practice, all emphasise the necessity of observing children (Ailwood, 2003a). Observation – like play and child-centredness – seems to be a taken-for-granted practice in early childhood education. While on the surface, it may appear to be an unproblematic concept concerned with ‘helping’ children, another reading is that it is “the key means by which teachers regulate young children” (Ailwood, 2003a, p. 131). Dahlberg *et al.* (2007) describe observations as a technology of normalisation concerned with assessing whether children are conforming to particular standards:

...the purpose of 'child observation' is to assess children's psychological development in relation to already predetermined categories produced from developmental psychology and which define what the normal child should be doing at a particular age. The focus in these observations is not children's learning processes, but more on the idea of classifying and categorizing children in relation to a general schema of developmental levels and stages. (p. 146)

Thus, when practitioners engage in observation, it is not just a practice relating to children's 'freedom' and 'best interests'; it is also a powerful instrument of classification and judgement based on developmental assumptions.

The literature questioning the dominance of developmental psychology in early childhood education is illustrative of the emergence of poststructural perspectives. However, according to Cannella (2008), reconceptualist research in early childhood education represents "only a small percentage of the disseminated scholarship and academic constructions of practice within the field" (p. 17). As Ailwood (2003a) explains, while the reconceptualist movement is positioned as the dominant challenge to DAP, "it remains a dominance of the margins" (p. 76). MacNaughton (2005), citing numerous other researchers, declares that developmental psychology is so prominent in early childhood education that "it is a foundational discipline of study for early childhood educators...and...a pervasive influence on early childhood pedagogies" (p. 25). Fler (2003a) similarly observes that, while developmental psychology has been critiqued in a range of research contexts, changes to curriculum and teaching support material have been slower to be realised. Regardless of the critiques directed towards it, developmental psychology retains its place as fundamental to early childhood education (Ailwood, 2003a). Therefore, while poststructural views may be "seeping into" early childhood education (Yelland & Kilderry, 2008a, p. 2), it seems that modernist notions prevail.

Proposing that early childhood education is complex, Walsh (2008) maintains it needs to employ a range of theoretical perspectives, rather than limiting itself to one viewpoint. Fler (2006) similarly argues that if an institution foregrounds only one view of development, then practitioners expect and accept only one developmental trajectory. Apparently aligning with the poststructural problematisation of dualistic

thinking, Walsh (2008) argues that to completely reject a developmental perspective would simply serve to “substitute one limited perspective, and one narrow orthodoxy, for another” (p. 46). Describing developmental theory as “necessary but not sufficient” (p. 40), he calls for a rethink of the dominant developmental perspective in early childhood education, which he believes is outmoded and should be replaced with contemporary developmental theory which takes contextual factors (e.g. culture) into account. Flear (2005) similarly explains that it is not her intention to dismiss developmental theory, but “to find possible directions to move the field forward” (p. 3). Burman (2008), too, is not appealing for developmental psychology to be disposed of; rather, she calls for vigilance regarding its intended and unintended effects – that is, for greater awareness of whose development is privileged and therefore whose is marginalised. Following Baker (1999), I recognise that developmental psychology has been beneficial in terms of, for example, its focus on children’s health, but like Burman (2008), my concerns centre around the “more dangerous and less good implications of its emergence” (Baker, 1999, p. 820). I am concerned with potentially negative consequences of uncritical reliance on developmental discourses.

Similar concerns have been raised in the physical education literature by Burrows (1997; 1999; 2004) and Burrows and Wright (2001). Burrows and Wright (2001) highlight the influence of developmental psychology on physical education by explaining that developmental theories have informed curriculum decision-making and assessment procedures, and provided justifications for physical education’s existence. Burrows (1997) claims that developmental notions are so taken for granted in education generally and physical education in particular that we rarely “think about what lies underneath the rhetoric and question the foundational principles which inform our use of developmental precepts” (p. 2). Burrows and Wright (2001), however, assert that there are good reasons to do so. Echoing the reconceptualist research in early childhood education, these authors propose that developmental discourses have “normative and exclusionary tendencies” and are incompatible with “goals of equity or respect for culturally diverse practice and/or educational outcomes” (p. 179). As noted earlier, a focus on age-related ‘norms’ leads to

comparisons and judgements (Burrows, 2004), which can have negative consequences for those who do not match the developmental ‘criteria’ for their age. For instance, they may find themselves labelled ‘immature’ or ‘developmentally delayed’ (Burrows, 2004).

Burrows and Wright (2001) cite the work of Morss (1996) to highlight three strands of critiques of developmental psychology that, since the 1960s, have been particularly influential:

- Critiques from a social context (which propose that more attention should be paid to the way social factors influence and shape child development)
- Critiques from a range of humanist perspectives (which can broadly be termed the ‘social construction school’; they destabilise notions of the centrality of the ‘individual’ and emphasise the interpersonal processes through which humans construct their reality)
- Critiques from a poststructural perspective (which view the ‘facts’ of developmental psychology as social constructions).

Burrows’s (1999) and Burrows and Wright’s (2001) research, which involved a text analysis of the 1987 New Zealand physical education syllabus for junior classes to form seven, is underpinned by a poststructural perspective. Burrows (1999) – noting that technologies drawn from developmental psychology include procedures for categorisation, ranking and testing – observes that while developmental psychology has traditionally been portrayed as oriented towards benevolent ends, under poststructural scrutiny, it can be re-read as concerned with regulation, monitoring and surveillance. Burrows and Wright (2001) conclude that developmental discourses provide just one way of observing and regulating children’s behaviour and progress, and propose that alternative perspectives may provide a broader range of possibilities for understanding children’s experiences in physical education.

Burrows (1999) notes that while developmental psychology has tended to be primarily preoccupied with cognitive development, thus paying little attention to the body, a site where the body takes centre stage is within the sub-discipline of motor development. As illustrated by my earlier discussion of research related to preschool

physical education, a motor development discourse prevails in much physical education research. Like the developmental discourses critiqued earlier, motor skill development is often positioned by researchers such as David L. Gallahue as a linear, age-related series of stages (Burrows, 1999). Gallahue (2001) claims his work is concerned with “developmental physical education [which] encourages the uniqueness of the individual, and is based on the fundamental proposition that although motor development is age-related, it is not age-dependent” (p. 4). This acknowledgement of individual variation still positions motor development as a series of progressive stages, and so does not counter the criticisms of developmental psychology discussed above. Rather, it appears to be used to justify ‘developmental physical education’ on the grounds that basic movement development does not ‘just happen’ due to maturation alone.

My discussion of preschool physical education research showed that motor development is often positioned as unquestioningly ‘good’ and ‘imperative’ for children. However, sociocultural research in physical education questions the ‘taken-for-grantedness’ of this assumption and interrogates the workings and potential effects of this discourse. Thorpe (2003), for instance, critiques the privileging of motor skill development in physical education, claiming it positions the acquisition of certain motor skills as ‘essential’, and invokes the notion of a ‘crisis’ whereby children are viewed as ‘deficient’ and in need of expert knowledge and training. Wright (1997) similarly argues that the skill acquisition model leads to gendered practices, whereby girls in particular often come to be viewed as deficient and unskilled. She suggests that centring physical education on discourses which privilege knowledge and practices associated with traditionally masculine team games works to construct unequal power relations and devalued identities.

Both Wright (1997) and Thorpe (2003) indicate that the privileging of a motor skill development discourse in physical education can lead to classification and exclusion (Gore, 1995) of some individuals. I similarly wonder if an emphasis on what preschoolers ‘should’ and ‘should not’ be able to do could lead to classification and exclusion (Gore, 1995) of some preschoolers because of perceived motor skill

deficiencies. Following Burrows and Wright (2001), I recognise that acquiring skills labelled ‘basic’ or ‘fundamental’ (i.e. locomotor, stability and manipulation skills) will be a life-long challenge for some children, and question if specifically associating these skills with young children pathologises those who do not accomplish them when developmental ‘truths’ say they ‘should’.

This concern with classifying and regulating motor skill performances shows that schools and preschools do not just focus on educating children’s minds, they are also concerned with monitoring and shaping children’s bodies (Shilling, 2003). This section of the chapter has shown that children in early childhood education, physical education and specifically preschool physical education contexts may be judged and classified according to powerful ‘truths’ related to developmental discourses, including those concerned with motor skill development. There is another dominant set of ‘truths’ by which children’s bodies in physical education contexts may similarly be monitored and evaluated; I am referring to discourses related to health and physical activity. I noted earlier that, while research focusing on preschool physical education is quite scarce, an increasing body of literature is concerned with preschool physical activity, particularly in terms of health promotion and obesity prevention. While this literature characterises the measurement of preschoolers’ physical activity levels and the implementation of physical activity interventions as a necessary ‘good’, a growing body of sociocultural research challenges the ‘taken-for-grantedness’ of this assumption. I now examine this research.

## **2.5 Sociocultural research related to physical education, health and physical activity**

### **2.5.1 The ‘obesity epidemic’**

According to Bell, McNaughton and Salmon (2009), while there has been sporadic interest in childhood obesity since at least the 1920s, the past decade has seen this topic generate an “intense frenzy...amongst health professionals, the media and the public” (p. 159). The notion of an ‘obesity epidemic’, allegedly a potential health disaster afflicting people in many countries, is feverishly being reported on in both academic scholarship and popular media (Gard & Wright, 2005). In the past three



decades, a large amount of epidemiological research has been dedicated to investigating the relationships between physical activity, weight and health (Gard, 2004a). Epidemiology is “the study of the occurrence, distribution, and control of infectious and noninfectious diseases in populations, including all forms of disease that relate to the environment and ways of life” (McFerran, 2003, p. 210). Epidemiological research produces statistics about people and their behaviour and plays a vital role in the production of health policy (Gard, 2004a). Schools, and physical education contexts in particular, are increasingly positioned as important sites for the promotion of healthy lifestyles (Cale & Harris, in press; Gard, 2004b; McDermott, in press), with teachers encouraged to incorporate health aims into their physical education curricula (Evans, 2003).

A focus on promoting healthy lifestyles implies that individuals must change the way they live in order to achieve outcomes health authorities consider to be desirable (Gard, 2008). This notion of individuals being responsible for their own health bears the hallmarks of neoliberalism. Macdonald (2011) defines neoliberalism as “an approach to governing society in such a way as to reconfigure people as productive economic entrepreneurs who are responsible for making sound choices in their education, work, health, and lifestyle” (p. 37). Humans are considered to be rational, self-managing, autonomous individuals (Lupton, 1999; Macdonald, 2011). Consequently, people are deemed to be responsible for their own health through the work they do on themselves (Macdonald, 2011). Choosing to engage in ‘healthy’ practices is imperative to being a ‘good’ civic subject (Petherick, in press; Rawlins, 2008). This notion of individuals being responsible for making ‘healthy’ lifestyle choices by, for example, avoiding ‘bad’ practices related to exercise and food is known as healthism (Crawford, 1980). Healthism is premised on the notion that the provision of information will lead to changed attitudes and consequently changed behaviours (Quennerstedt, Burrows & Maivorsdotter, 2010). Thus, alignment with this discourse leads to the promotion of ‘healthy lifestyles’ at schools and specifically in physical education, where the notion that exercise equals fitness equals health (Gard & Wright, 2001) is “extolled, valorized and claimed as truth” (Johns, 2005, p. 72).

The influence of healthism on physical education in Scotland is evident in the subject's relocation from the curricular area of expressive arts to the area of health and wellbeing in the recently published Curriculum for Excellence (Learning and Teaching Scotland (LTS), 2009a). In Chapter Five, I interrogate the curricular documentation related to physical education and show how discourses related to health and physical activity are prevalent. I discuss how these concepts are presented with language that implies authority and certainty. The certainty portrayed in the Curriculum for Excellence documentation is also evident in many academic papers, policies and media reports. Certainty is constructed as essential in 'risk societies' (Beck, 1992a, 1992b, cited in Gard & Wright, 2001) – for example, societies deemed to be at 'risk' of an 'obesity epidemic' – because it gives the impression of a sense of control, that the 'risk' in question can be managed (Gard & Wright, 2001). Specific 'experts' are positioned as the providers of this certainty (Evans, 2003; Gard & Wright, 2001). These experts draw on particular 'truths'; regarding the 'obesity epidemic', these 'truths' are drawn from science and medicine. This 'expert' knowledge is therefore privileged.

In this context, an approach to physical education underpinned by the notion of healthism relies heavily on biomedical and epidemiological research for legitimisation (Gard & Wright, 2001). Since education has traditionally been positioned below medicine and science in terms of hierarchies of knowledge (Gard, 2011), 'evidence' from biomedicine and epidemiology may be seen to give the field of physical education greater credibility (Johns, 2005). Thus, with panics about obesity, and physical education positioned as a site of prevention and/or intervention, some physical educators may see the 'obesity epidemic' in terms of "the world's misfortune [being] physical education's windfall" (Gard, 2011, p. 402). However, while biomedical and epidemiological 'truths' may appear to provide physical education with legitimisation and certainty, a critical examination of this research reveals that there is little certainty to be found (Evans, 2003; Evans, Rich & Davies, 2004; Gard & Wright, 2001; Gard & Wright, 2005; Johns, 2005; Kirk, 2006).

Childhood obesity researcher Reilly (2007) – an ‘expert’ – writing an overview of research related to childhood obesity in the (non-epidemiological) journal *Children & Society*, defines obesity as “a disorder in which the body fat content has become so high that it creates health problems or and [sic] increased risk of health problems” (p. 390). Overweight, on the other hand, does not refer to an excess of fat, but to an excess of weight in relation to some standard (Evans, 2003). This distinction is significant, but obesity and overweight are often conflated in research reporting, resulting in exaggerated claims about obesity levels (Evans, 2003). Another issue is that while weight is easy to calculate, fatness is not (Evans, 2003; Reilly, 2007; Ross, 2005). Elucidating one of the main reasons why certainty is so elusive in obesity science, Reilly (2007) admits, “As body fat content cannot be measured accurately, we need, for most practical purposes, a simple proxy or surrogate measure of fatness to act as the basis of an obesity definition” (p. 390). He proposes that research shows that the best measure available is the Body Mass Index (BMI), which is calculated by dividing weight in kilogrammes by height in metres squared. A person is deemed to be overweight or obese if his or her BMI is higher than a particular figure (e.g. according to Reilly (2007), adults are classified as overweight if they have a BMI of 25 or more, and obese with a BMI of 30 or more).

BMI, however, is widely acknowledged as problematic (Evans, 2003), for numerous reasons. For instance, it is obviously imprecise, since it measures weight, not fat. It thus does not account for variation in terms of physique (e.g. size in terms of bone or muscle rather than fat) or differences in levels of fat because of gender or ethnicity (Ross, 2005). It is also highly problematic when used with children (Hann, 2002, cited in Evans, 2003; Kirk, 2006; Ross, 2005). Reilly (2007) acknowledges this, but claims that the solution is to interpret BMI relative to age, by comparing it with charts based on “a reference population of healthy children and adolescents” (p. 391). Reilly draws on developmental discourses to position age-related charts as a means of classifying and regulating children’s bodies; children are expected to be particular sizes and weights at particular ages. This ‘solution’ is questionable when the criticisms of developmental psychology, as discussed earlier, are considered.

Evans (2003) notes that despite the criticisms of BMI, it is still widely accepted and used. The uncertainty surrounding it in research contexts is lost in the translation to academic publications, media reports and policy (Evans, 2003). Indeed, this transition from uncertainty to certainty is evident in Reilly's (2007) paper. He all but abandons his initial admission that BMI is but "a simple proxy or surrogate measure" (p. 390) by declaring that children and adolescents identified as obese using BMI "are consistently the fattest children in the population" (p. 391) and that "almost all children and adolescents with a high BMI for their age are excessively fat" (p. 391). He also somewhat contradictorily claims that misclassification due to individual variation is rare, but that many children and adolescents identified as 'normal' or 'healthy' according to BMI are actually "excessively fat" (Reilly, 2006a, cited in Reilly, 2007, p. 391). Since he has admitted that fat cannot be measured accurately, I wonder how he judges this "excessive" fatness. If he is basing such judgements on subjective assessments, this is problematic since he asserts further down the page that "there is good evidence that subjectively assessing the weight status of a child is notoriously unreliable and inaccurate" (p. 391). Thus subjective assessments (presumably based on observation) are deemed imprecise and the earlier caution and uncertainty regarding BMI is forgotten as it is constructed as more reliable and thus legitimate. Rather than a reason for scepticism or doubt, Reilly positions the uncertainty surrounding BMI as *supportive* of claims about an 'obesity epidemic'; the main issue, he states, is that "obesity is underestimated when using the BMI" (p. 392). Uncertainty has thus been transformed into certainty with the curious assertion that although we do not have an accurate method of determining obesity levels, they *must* be worse than what we have managed to work out; BMI might be uncertain, the 'obesity epidemic' is not.

This is just one example of how uncertainty related to obesity can masquerade as certainty. Other issues similarly relate to the reporting of claims that are not justified. Gard and Wright (2005), for instance, have shown that many 'truths' about relationships between food, physical activity and weight are built on shaky foundations. Their detailed analysis shows that, with regard to the 'energy balance' model of food and physical activity, there is little "conclusive proof of anything" (p.

47). There is also uncertainty surrounding the relationship between overweight or obesity and health, and the alleged role of physical activity in preventing or treating it (Gard & Wright, 2001). Allegations connecting television watching with overweight and obesity are also more complicated and tenuous than is usually acknowledged (Gard & Wright, 2005). In a similar vein, Kirk (2006) cites Marshall *et al.* (2004) in asserting that there is little evidence to support common claims that link inactivity and sedentary behaviours with increased levels of fatness. There is uncertainty and a lack of evidence related to these issues because causational (as opposed to correlational) conclusions are extremely difficult to establish (Gard & Wright, 2005). Concomitantly, it is important to note that epidemiological studies identify 'risk' in probabilistic rather than deterministic terms (Evans, 2003; Ross, 2005). This means it is inappropriate to predict individual risk of ill health based on population studies (Evans, 2003; Gard & Wright, 2001; Ross, 2005), as they ignore complex contextual factors (Nelkin, 2003, cited in Gard & Wright, 2005).

Evans (2003) suggests that many claims related to obesity research are "at best over-exaggerated, at worst unfounded" (p. 87). My discussion so far has attempted to demonstrate Evans's point. I move on now to look at possible effects of these obesity 'truths', which, despite the flaws and inconsistencies discussed, are dominant both in society generally and in physical education specifically.

'Truths' related to obesity can have similar effects to the developmental discourses discussed earlier. In education and specifically physical education contexts, obesity prevention and healthism discourses can be similarly normative and exclusionary. Like the way developmental discourses foreground only one view of development (Fleer, 2006), obesity prevention and healthism discourses are only concerned with a "scientifically normative view of health" (Quennerstedt, 2008, p. 275). Practitioners are thus encouraged to engage in surveillance and classification of children's bodies, and with specific expectations regarding size and weight, those who do not 'match' the criteria may be considered resistant, lazy, bad or weak (Johns, 2005). The neoliberal, healthism concern with individual responsibility for health may perpetuate a "'blame the victim' culture", in which being fat is "interpreted as an

outward sign of neglect of one's corporeal self" (Evans, 2003, p. 96). Characterising obesity as a behavioural and therefore avoidable disease (Evans, 2006) means it is simplistically and uncritically positioned as a "story of sloth and gluttony" (Gard & Wright, 2005, p. 6). In this context, moral judgements may lead to certain children (and parents) being classified as "irresponsible and morally lacking" (Gard, 2008, p. 490). As such, healthism has the effect of obscuring the "social, cultural, psychological and economic complexities of obesity" (Evans, Evans & Rich, 2003, p. 225). It ignores the "day-to-day realities of people's lives" (Gard & Wright, 2005, p. 143) and pays no attention to the structural and environmental factors that constrain their abilities to make 'good' choices (Bell *et al.*, 2009; Wright & Dean, 2007). Consequently, it stigmatises certain people (e.g. those from lower socio-economic groups) as 'at risk' and in need of intervention (Bell *et al.*, 2009; Burrows, 2011; Evans, 2003; Evans, Davies & Rich, 2008; Evans *et al.*, 2003; Gard & Wright, 2001; Gard & Wright, 2005; Vander Schee, 2009a).

While interventions may be "uncritically welcomed as a kind of individual and cultural salvation" (Vander Schee & Boyles, 2010, p. 170), their effects are not benign (Evans, 2003). I wonder if children in these situations may be positioned as 'couch potatoes' (Gard & Wright, 2005) and 'docile' bodies (Foucault, 1991e) that must be controlled and monitored by expert adults, who subject them to biopedagogies (Harwood, 2009). The concept of biopedagogies suggests that children in health promotion and obesity prevention contexts become subjected to disciplinary practices that aim to surveil, control and re-shape their bodies and their embodied selves. Furthermore, biopedagogies incite children to engage in various practices in order to be considered 'good' students and citizens (Petherick, in press). Burrows and Wright (2004; 2007) suggest that, as well as encouraging adults to engage in surveillance and classification of children's bodies and practices, an emphasis on obesity discourses may lead children to engage in self-monitoring and self-surveillance regarding their bodies (e.g. their physical activity levels and eating practices). Brace-Govan (2002) uses the term 'bodywork' to describe these individualistic disciplinary bodily practices. Bodywork could lead to some children experiencing feelings of guilt, anxiety, fear and unhappiness (Burrows & Wright,

2004; Evans, 2003; Evans *et al.*, 2004; Gard & Wright, 2001). It seems that, in this context, while a health promotion agenda may have benevolent intentions, it could in fact be damaging to children's health and wellbeing (Evans, 2003; Evans, Rich & Davies, 2011; Quennerstedt, 2008; Wright & Dean, 2007).

There is also the argument that such health interventions, with their focus on individual responsibility, are problematic when we think in terms of contextual factors and the realities of many children's lives. For instance, as Evans *et al.* (2003) ask, what if children have no 'healthy' options at home? Perhaps repeatedly informing people about 'healthy' practices that are simply not available to them only serves to cause them stress and worry (Thomas, 2006). The negative feelings mentioned above may again surface if children have the 'knowledge' that they are unavoidably engaging in 'bad' practices (Evans *et al.*, 2003). This may negatively affect relationships between children and parents (Gard & Wright, 2005). There could be similar consequences if children experience contexts and practices in which they become disgusted by and fearful of fat (Burrows & Wright, 2007). As well as the noted implications for overweight or obese children in these contexts, what about those who, for example, have overweight or obese family members? Again, following Gard and Wright (2005), I suggest that there could be damaging effects on these relationships.

Schools, particularly in physical education, seek to (re)educate children and young people about managing their bodies (Macdonald, Wright & Abbott, 2010). In the context of healthism and obesity discourses, this involves surveillance and classification of children's bodies in terms of size and weight, as well as regulation of their exercise and eating practices. Concerns with 'good' health and obesity prevention can thus be interpreted as forming a basis for social evaluation and control (Vander Schee, 2009a); the goal is not only to rescue those deemed to be 'at risk', but to regulate their behaviour according to particular social norms (Evans *et al.*, 2008). These practices, however, are based on 'truths' that are far less certain than they appear. While definitive declarations about, for example, obesity as an "epidemic" (e.g. Cardon *et al.*, 2008, p. 5) and "growing public health problem" (e.g.

Dowda *et al.*, 2004, p. 184) are commonplace, they are problematic, as certainty is something we simply do not have when it comes to obesity science. This uncertainty is often silenced, however, so obesity and healthism discourses circulate powerfully in physical education contexts and in society more widely. What is important to remember is that ‘truths’ associated with these discourses are not universal, fixed or ‘necessary’; they are value-laden social constructs (Evans & Davies, 2004a) that shift across time, culture and context (Evans *et al.*, 2011). They serve to construct particular ways of thinking about and acting upon children (Burrows & Wright, 2004; Hemming, 2007). Having discussed possible effects of these discourses and their associated practices in physical education, I now turn to research that has investigated the ways in which people engage with them.

### **2.5.2 People’s engagements with discourses related to physical education, health and physical activity**

A growing body of research features poststructural studies concerned with physical education and related areas such as physical activity, sport and health. Many of these studies focus on discourses and the ways in which people engage with them in order to construct their subjectivities. This research primarily concerns secondary school students or adults. Numerous researchers have investigated the ways in which young people engage with physical activity and/or health discourses (e.g. Atencio, 2006; Atencio, 2010; Atencio & Wright, 2009; Burrows, 2011; Macdonald *et al.*, 2009; MacPhail, Collier & O’Sullivan, 2009; O’Flynn, 2004; O’Flynn & Lee, 2010; O’Flynn & Petersen, 2007; Wright, O’Flynn & Macdonald, 2006). Others have conducted similar investigations with adults, including parents (e.g. Macdonald *et al.*, 2004), teachers and other school staff (e.g. Cliff & Wright, 2010; Evans *et al.*, 2003; Humberstone & Stan, 2011; Vander Schee, 2009a; Vander Schee, 2009b; Webb, Quennerstedt & Öhman, 2008) and preservice teachers of primary education (e.g. Garrett & Wrench, 2007; Garrett & Wrench, 2008) and physical education (e.g. Wrench & Garrett, 2008). Vander Schee (2009b) notes that most research exploring how health-related discourses are taken up and negotiated in schools has focused on students’, rather than staff members’, narratives. I have located no poststructural research that investigated preschool practitioners’ engagements with healthism, but I



now briefly discuss some studies concerning staff at primary schools as, like the participants in my research, they will generally not have a physical education teaching background.

Vander Schee (2009b) conducted interviews with eight administrators, teachers and other staff at a school actively involved in health promotion initiatives, and found that they spoke of the importance of modelling ‘healthy’ behaviours to the children. Illustrating alignment with healthism, the participants cited being overweight, smoking, being inactive, eating chocolate and drinking coffee as behaviours that would send students the ‘wrong’ message. Healthism tended to intersect in their talk with “themes of personal and social responsibility as well as themes of morality” (p. 417). Humberstone and Stan (2011) similarly found that the primary teachers who participated in their study of health and body image largely talked about and responded to healthism in uncritical ways.

Garrett and Wrench (2007) investigated 137 preservice primary teachers’ experiences of physical education, physical activity and sport in order to explore their engagements with these notions. They found that, while the participants described a diverse range of experiences, many of them talked about the dominance of sport in their early school-based experiences, during which perceptions of physical competence or incompetence were established. The participants reported that these perceptions were paramount in supporting their engagement in or disengagement from physical activity. Some participants experienced physical education as a form of public display or performance, which served to alienate them. Garrett and Wrench conclude that the study emphasises that “student teachers are not homogenous groups but active participants in making meaning and constructing identities around sport and physical education contexts” (p. 39). This point is pertinent to my study, as the practitioners were from a variety of backgrounds, and thus were likely to have had a diverse range of experiences of physical education. My investigation of their engagements with discourses related to physical education contributes to filling a gap in the literature, since I have not located any similar research concerning preschool practitioners.

Furthermore, I have not sourced any poststructural physical education research with preschool children. However, a small number of studies have involved primary school children. Burrows, Wright and Jungersen-Smith (2002) and Burrows, Wright and McCormack (2009), for instance, investigate how children aged between eight and 13 talked about physical activity, fitness and health. They report that the children consistently mentioned ‘good’ eating practices, drinking water, engaging in physical activity, and keeping clean as ways to be healthy, thus positioning health as a corporeal notion. Burrows *et al.* (2009) note that the vast majority of responses were concerned with eating and drinking practices. According to Burrows *et al.* (2002), the children – both boys and girls – closely related the notions of fitness, weight and appearance, while many of their comments connected fatness with laziness. These authors also report that some children talked about teasing and harassment resulting from being perceived as overweight. Both Burrows *et al.* (2002) and Burrows *et al.* (2009) conclude that the children’s responses illustrate the power of health and fitness discourses, as their talk reflected the alleged certainty of ‘truths’ associated with these discourses.

Burrows (2011), in a study involving a teacher as well as both primary and secondary school students from indigenous and/or lower socio-economic group backgrounds, reports similar findings. However, she focuses on the responses of four children (three who were at primary school) who disrupted these discourses. Illustrating the negative effects of healthism discussed above, two of the primary boys expressed worry about their weight. One talked about being teased for having “a fat bottom” (p. 346), while the other (aged nine) spoke of his fear that both he and members of his family had gained weight. A primary school girl expressed confusion about being teased at school for having a fat body while, in her Samoan culture, her cousin got ridiculed for being thin. While Burrows notes that the children ‘flip-flopped’ between embracing and challenging normative health discourses, her study shows that they engaged with health messages in complex ways, demonstrating that they were “neither cultural dopes nor dupes” (p. 349).

In another study, Burrows (2010b) similarly found that nine- and ten-year-olds engaged with, acted on and disrupted health messages in multiple ways. For instance, the children's talk showed that many of them felt constantly under surveillance (at home, at school and in the community) regarding their 'health' practices, and so engaged in self-monitoring, as well as surveillance and monitoring of others. However, while many children positioned eating fruit and vegetables as vital in relation to weight and health issues, and connected food, fitness and weight, some children recognised that engaging in particular diet and exercise practices does not always lead to desired weight. They thus illustrated complex engagement with these notions. This was also the case with the children in a study by Hemming (2007), which investigated the ways in which a class of nine- and ten-year-olds engaged with physical activity, health and sport discourses. He found that, while there was an emphasis on healthism in the school, the children spoke of fun and enjoyment more often than health when talking about why they engaged in particular 'healthy' activities. They showed 'knowledge' of health issues, however, and like the children in the studies of Burrows *et al.* (2002) and Burrows *et al.* (2009), they positioned health in corporeal terms, talking about the importance of healthy eating and exercise practices. However, Hemming found that many of the children challenged healthism by placing more value on fun and resisting healthism's associated practices. For instance, they used equipment intended for 'healthy' activities in alternative ways (e.g. tying each other up with skipping ropes). They therefore demonstrated agency and disrupted the notion that young children are 'incompetent'.

In a similar vein, Burrows (2010a) proposes that it is vital to recognise the value of regarding children as social actors who are capable of sharing and reflecting on their experiences. In a study of how four 11-year-olds from rural backgrounds engaged with physical activity discourses, she found that physical activity was an integral part of their lives. They talked about it in terms of sport, play, functional physical activity (e.g. chasing cattle on the family farm) and fun. Burrows notes that they spoke more enthusiastically about out of school physical activity experiences than those they had in school. She concludes that it is vital to consider and study children's physical activity participation in local contexts, families and communities.

According to Macdonald *et al.* (2005), it is important to listen to young children's voices in order to gain an understanding of broader issues in relation to their choices and meanings of health. These authors interviewed 13 seven- and eight-year-olds about their physical activity preferences and motivations, and found that the children cited fun, friendship and enjoyment as primary motivations for participation. They note, however, that the children also drew on a counter-discourse related to the "pedagogizing of everyday life in keeping with the responsible, self-managing citizen" (p. 206). The children talked about, for instance, self-surveillance (e.g. keeping themselves safe), self-improvement (e.g. trying their best) and good citizenship (e.g. teamwork). Another notable finding was evidence of gendering in relation to physical activity, with the boys mentioning activities like football and cricket to a greater extent than the girls, who tended to talk about gymnastics and dance. Regarding benefits of physical activity, while both boys and girls talked about weight loss and physical health, girls mentioned bone growth and development, while boys talked more in terms of gaining muscle strength. Thus, while both boys and girls generally expressed satisfaction with their bodies, they showed an awareness of "the work on their bodies that lies ahead of them" (p. 207).

Other studies investigating primary school aged children's talk about engagement in physical activity include Ha, Macdonald and Pang (2010) and MacDougall, Schiller and Darbyshire (2004). Ha *et al.* (2010) examined the place of physical activity in the lives of 48 Hong Kong Chinese children aged nine to 16 years and their parents. They found that, while the older children did not regard physical activity as a priority (they cited academic study as the most important aspect of their lives), the primary school aged children were interested in it. Like the children in the studies by Burrows (2010a) and Macdonald *et al.* (2005), they talked about physical activity and physical education in terms of fun.

Fun was something the children in MacDougall *et al.*'s (2004) study also positioned as important. These authors investigated 204 four- to 12-year-olds' meanings of physical activity. They found that the children characterised physical activity and exercise as adult concepts concerning organised activities. They talked about sport in

terms of talent, training and costing money. The children distinguished physical activity, exercise and sport from play, which they said involved fun, friends, spontaneity and freedom. Other notable findings were that, in contrast to taken-for-granted adult assumptions, the children did not consider television and computers to be barriers to physical activity, and they were ambivalent about the idea of adult sport stars as role models for participation. The children also showed little interest in alleged health benefits of physical activity.

I noted earlier that I had not located any poststructural physical education research specifically concerning preschool children. I have, however, sourced a study from a different field that is relevant to my discussion. Writing in the journal *Pediatric Rehabilitation*, Almqvist *et al.* (2006) report on a qualitative study in which they investigated 68 preschoolers' perceptions of health. These authors found that the children, who were four and five years old, showed a complex understanding of health as a multi-dimensional concept (i.e. related to body, activity, participation and environment). The children particularly emphasised engagement in activities (especially play) as important for maintaining or restoring health. Almqvist *et al.* observe that the children demonstrated "the ability to express themselves in a far more competent manner than could be expected based on earlier research" (p. 281).

The studies discussed show, as Almqvist *et al.* (2006) discovered, that young children can share their thoughts and experiences in ways that disrupt the idea that they are 'incompetent' or 'too young' to have their voices heard. The children in these studies engaged with discourses related to health and physical activity in complex ways, showing that they were not simply 'docile' bodies (Foucault, 1991e). Some of them also, however, demonstrated that the negative effects of healthism discussed earlier were indeed a reality for them. Evans and Davies (2004b) note that in neoliberal conditions, in which healthism flourishes, teachers (and pupils) tend to focus more on *what* they do, rather than *why* they are doing it. However, in light of the work of the many sociocultural scholars I have cited, it seems vital that physical education teachers and other practitioners engage more critically with notions related to health, obesity prevention and physical activity. It seems likely that the growing

number of epidemiological studies and ensuing policies seeking to increase young children's physical activity levels have great power to structure preschool physical education. While this documentation tends to claim with certainty that we must 'fight' an impending catastrophe called the 'obesity epidemic', this certainty is not justified. According to Evans (2003), we should not be disappointed by this, but should accept that certainties, much as we might desire them, are rare. In his view, "Science, at its very best (and obesity research is no exception to this rule), does not offer certainties and we should be on our guard against those who, for whatever reason, lay claim to having found them" (p. 96).

## **2.6 Conclusion**

I began this chapter by examining the small amount of research I sourced related to preschool physical education, and the growing body of research concerned with preschool physical activity. My ensuing discussion of literature related to early childhood pedagogy showed that developmental discourses are prevalent in the early childhood education field. Reconceptualist research in early childhood, which takes a more sociocultural perspective, challenges the dominance of developmental discourses. Examining similarly sociocultural physical education research led to a discussion of healthism.

The literature indicates that developmentalism and healthism may have been prevalent discourses of physical education at the three preschool settings. My study investigates if this was the case. I interrogate the workings and effects of discourses that were circulating, by examining the ways in which the participants engaged with them. The next chapter outlines the study's theoretical framework.

## **Chapter 3 – Theory**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter details the poststructural, Foucaultian theoretical framework that underpins the study. In order to explain what is meant by poststructuralism, the chapter begins by exploring the notions of modernity, postmodernism and poststructuralism, particularly in relation to physical education and early childhood education. It then examines the work of Michel Foucault (1926-1984), particularly his scholarship around discourses, power and subjectivities. I am specifically concerned with his work around techniques of power (1982; 1991e; 1998) and his later conceptualisation of the technologies of the self (1992; 2000c), as I draw on these concepts in Chapters Six and Seven to interrogate the ways in which the participants engaged with particular preschool physical education discourses in order to construct their subjectivities.

### **3.2 Modernity, postmodernism and poststructuralism**

#### **3.2.1 Introduction**

We live in times of profound social and cultural changes (Wright, 2004a). Penney and Chandler (2000) call for thought and debate regarding the contribution of physical education to children's education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a time that features "a world, societies and economies very different from those of the 19th and much of the 20th century" (p. 71). According to Kirk (2004), all stakeholders involved in education need to realise that practices of education for docility-utility are no longer useful; today's children, rather than following "a predetermined linear trajectory...are active in constructing their own lives" (Wright, 2004a, p. 3). Penney and Chandler (2000) contend that substantial change is needed within physical education if it is to have educational value in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As Wright (2004a) warns, unless schools acknowledge and adapt to "the contexts in which students live and their experiences, knowledge, capacities and concerns, they run the risk of being increasingly irrelevant for many young people" (p. 4). She emphasises that physical education cannot and should not be disconnected from the wider social and cultural world, and calls for a

rethink of “the nature, type and content of a curriculum that has undergone little change since the advent of mass schooling in the 1950s” (p. 4).

Early childhood education scholars Dahlberg *et al.* (2007) echo Wright’s (2004a) assertion that physical education cannot and should not be disconnected from wider society in expressing a similar concern about early childhood education. In their view, “too much discussion of early childhood occurs in a social, political, economic and philosophical vacuum, as if young children exist apart from the world” (p. 10). Yelland and Kilderry (2008a) also align with the aforementioned physical education researchers in observing that “the majority of education systems, at least in the western world, have...ignored the changes that have been going around [sic] them” (p. 2). These authors explain that modernist notions of universality and reason have prevailed, resulting in the traditional nature and structure of early childhood education being maintained.

The scholars cited in the discussion above are calling for physical education and early childhood education to take account of sociocultural and poststructural perspectives. This thesis takes up a poststructural perspective in order to investigate the discourses that underlie and produce physical education at three preschools. In order to foreground my explanation of poststructuralism and postmodernism, I briefly discuss modernity.

### **3.2.2 Modernity**

Modernity is the period of (western) history, dating from the Enlightenment, which has scientific rationality as one of its main characteristics (Danaher, Schirato & Webb, 2007). Modernist thought is founded upon the belief that humans have the capacity to engage in reason and rationality, leading to moral and intellectual progress and ultimately perfection (Robinson & Jones Díaz, 2006). A modernist perspective views the world as ordered and knowable, where individuals have an inherent, essential nature that exists independently of context and relationships (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007). Modernity has driven us to associate science with progress, and truth with certainty (Bloch, 2000).



Elucidating Yelland and Kilderry's (2008a) point about the prevalence of modernist notions in early childhood education, Cannella (2008) asserts that dominant discourses that continue to control the field include child development and scientific knowledge. As discussed in Chapter Two, these discourses have had a profound and lasting impact on early childhood education. However, Yelland and Kilderry (2008a) propose that new frameworks for early childhood education are needed because traditional approaches do not capture the complexity of life in today's world. These authors maintain that, despite the prevalence of modernist notions, postmodern perspectives are "seeping into social and educational thinking whereby many have begun to question the validity and impossibilities of...*grand narratives* and universal truths" (p. 2, emphasis in original). Robinson and Jones Díaz (2006) explain that grand narratives "tend to provide monolithic universal explanations of social relationships and of power" (pp. 13-14). Postmodern perspectives avoid such generalisations (Wright, 2006) and are concerned with "pulling apart, and perhaps rejecting the meta-narratives or dominant discourses that currently operate within education" (Yelland & Kilderry, 2008b, p. 243).

### **3.2.3 Postmodernism and poststructuralism**

The terms postmodernism and poststructuralism are often used interchangeably (Macdonald *et al.*, 2002; Wright, 2004b; Wright, 2006), although Wright (2004b) argues that there are differences that go beyond the terminology (e.g. 'postmodernism' is often used globally to describe a period of time). As Robinson and Jones Díaz (2006) explain, postmodernism is "an intellectual and cultural movement that has gained prominence since the mid-twentieth century", while "poststructuralism is part of the matrix of postmodernism" (p.15). Wright (2004b) explains that 'postmodernism' is more likely to be used in North America and 'poststructuralism' by those following a traditionally European approach. For these reasons, I refer to 'poststructuralism' throughout the thesis in relation to *my* study, but in the ensuing discussion, the words 'poststructuralism' and 'postmodernism' are sometimes used interchangeably, according to the scholarship cited. Wright (2006) explains that, while definitions are difficult to pin down, research guided by these perspectives generally:

- Critiques essentialist notions of identity/self
- Contends that reality is not fixed
- Assumes it is important to understand how power relations work in determining what meanings have precedence in particular contexts.

Poststructuralism provides a critique of modernist notions (Robinson & Jones Díaz, 2006) by implying a deep scepticism of order and progress, and celebrating diversity and fragmentation (Bilton *et al.*, 2002). It provokes thinking “against the grain” (Deegan, 2004, p. 226) of dominant discourses. Cox (2010) explains that poststructuralism is a theoretical approach that emerged as a critique of structuralism, which assumes that the ‘truth’ of ‘reality’ and the social world can be revealed by collecting and studying data. In contrast, poststructuralism proposes that “there is no absolute knowledge, no absolute reality waiting ‘out there’ to be discovered” (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007, p. 23). Contrary to modernist and structuralist beliefs, ‘truth’ is regarded as a fiction, as knowledge is constructed in relation to context (Wright, 2006). As Scheurich (1997) explains, “there are social and historical constraints on what can be claimed as truth, or whatever other word we use to designate knowledge, in any particular social and historical location” (p. 34). Knowledge is inscribed in power relations, which determine what is ‘truth’; knowledge is the effect of, and cannot be separated from, power (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007). Weedon (1997) proposes that poststructuralism is a useful framework “for understanding the mechanisms of power in...society and the possibilities of change” (p. 10). The relationship between knowledge, truth and power is explored later in the chapter when Foucault’s work is discussed.

Postmodern and poststructural views reject notions of a reality that is fixed; they counter beliefs in certainty (Cannella, 2008; Macdonald *et al.*, 2002) and view knowledge as “full of contradictions, unanswered questions and cultural prejudices” (Danaher *et al.*, 2007, p. 2). Wright (2006) observes that postmodern and poststructural research in education attempts to “make visible the ways in which power and knowledge operate to privilege certain practices and forms of subjectivity and to examine the effects on the lives of individuals and groups” (p. 60). In this

vein, the current study investigates the ways in which particular physical education discourses at three preschools work to privilege particular practices and subjectivities for practitioners and children.

Poststructuralists do not view subjectivity as unified or fixed, but as discontinuous, fluid, conflicted and constantly in process (Weedon, 1997). Subjectivity is thus regarded as constructed; it is socially produced, rather than innate or genetically determined (Weedon, 1997). Poststructuralism also challenges the Cartesian dualism which positions humans in terms of having “minds within bodies rather than [as] mind/body unities” (Paechter, 2004, p. 309). This dualism is problematic because, like all binaries, it is hierarchical (Fitzpatrick, in press; Wright, 2000b); the inferior body is positioned as something to be worked on by the superior mind. Therefore, rather than conceiving of the mind and body as separate entities (Light, 2008), poststructuralists conceptualise the self as embodied (Wright, 2000b). Embodied subjectivities are constituted in relation to particular discourses, which describe and define the world and how to act in it (O’Flynn, 2010). Subjectivity is thus “an effect of discourse” (Weedon, 1997, p. 82). However, aligning with Foucault’s notion of the technologies of the self, which is discussed later in the chapter, I agree with MacLure (2003), who asserts that “although subjectivities are formed within discourses, people are not simply passive recipients of their ‘identity papers’” (p. 19). Like MacLure, I believe individuals are not merely passive recipients of discourse, but can demonstrate resistance and make choices. According to Weedon (1997), such resistance and choice is possible when we recognise that meaning is plural and have knowledge of multiple discourses. She proposes that resistance is possible even if choice is not available, as resistance is the first step in the production of alternative discourses.

Kermode and Brown (1996) criticise what they term “the postmodernist hoax” (p. 375) for “ignoring” and “denying” the existence of grand narratives and therefore contributing to “systems of oppression” (p. 380). For instance, they claim that postmodernism silences women’s voices by denying the grand narrative of patriarchy. This thesis, however, questions and disrupts discourses concerned with

grand narratives, rather than ignores or denies their existence. In my view, to propose that the notion of grand narratives is unsatisfactory or dangerous (or oppressive) is not to deny it exists. Contrary to Kermode and Brown's contention that postmodern perspectives reinforce oppression, my concern with interrogating discourses of preschool physical education involves examining the effects of discourses and grand narratives, in order to 'make visible' the ways in which certain discourses become inter-linked with knowledge and power relations, leading to the privileging of particular practices and subjectivities (Wright, 2006). I acknowledge that my analysis is likely to raise more questions than answers (Wright & Burrows, 2006), but following Rønholt (2002), I believe that critically analysing discourses "makes visible what is usually hidden" (p. 34) and opens debates around their potential implications for practice. Such debates are important in relation to preschool physical education so that researchers, policy makers and practitioners can critically reflect upon their taken-for-granted assumptions and practices. In this way, they can develop an awareness of the potential 'work' of particular discourses and consequently consider alternative discourses and "new possibilities for practice" (Wright, 2006, p. 60).

It should also be noted that engaging in postmodern thinking does not mean dismissing science; postmodern perspectives treat science seriously and recognise its significance (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007). However, postmodernism problematises science's "claims to hold a monopoly of the truth" and ability to comprehend "the complexity of the world and the multiplicity, ambivalence and uncertainty of life" (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007, p. 25). In this way, science (e.g. related to developmental psychology or obesity) is not rejected, but it is no longer regarded as an unquestionable source of 'truth' (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007). In a similar vein, Wright (2008), referring specifically to educational research, explains that empiricist models of research have been, and continue to be, challenged on the basis that universal theories are not possible in educational research, because of the complexity of contexts and the diversity of individuals. Explaining that another feature of postmodernism is the problematisation of dualistic thinking, Dahlberg *et al.* (2007) assert that, for postmodern thinkers, "cut and dried boundaries and total discontinuity

are as suspect as linear progress and development of thought” (pp. 25-26). In other words, rather than an ‘either/or’ choice, postmodernists prefer to consider ‘both/and’ (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007). Aligning with this view, Yelland and Kilderry (2008b) propose that postmodern perspectives on early childhood education do not involve completely disbanding and disregarding all current and past pedagogies and curricula; rather, postmodernism entails being open to changing contexts, and rethinking pedagogies and curricula accordingly.

Teaching in a postmodern world is characterised by change and uncertainty, and the techniques and content that were considered to be relevant in previous times are “not sufficient in the current educational climate where educational goals and needs are rapidly shifting” (Yelland & Kilderry, 2008b, p. 244). As discussed in Chapter Two, the traditional foundations of early childhood education have shifted in recent years to make room for poststructural perspectives, and one way this is happening is via the reconceptualisation of the field (Yelland & Kilderry, 2008a). Reconceptualist research has involved questioning the notion of predetermined, universal childhoods (Cannella, 1999) and thus disrupting child development theories, such as Piaget’s (Robinson & Jones Díaz, 2006). One criticism of particular relevance to the current discussion is that developmental theories promote the idea that children are merely adults-in-training (Sorin, 2005). As Mayall (2002) observes, psychology has traditionally regarded childhood as preparation for adulthood, thus implying that children are incompetent and do not have agency (Woodrow & Press, 2007).

Sociologists of childhood, on the other hand, stress the present tense of childhood and view children as agents (Mayall, 2002). There is no such thing as a universal childhood; rather, childhood is socially constructed and a unique experience for everyone (Cobb *et al.*, 2005). Children are regarded to be actively engaged with their social and cultural environment and to have the “capacities to shape and contribute to the world around them” (Lodge, Devine & Deegan, 2004, p. 8). Viewing children in this way emphasises their “critical and reflective skills and challenges traditional patterns of dominance/subordination in child/adult relations” (Devine, 2004, p. 112). An assumption of research related to the sociology of childhood is that children have

a right to have their voices heard in relation to events that concern them (Cobb *et al.*, 2005). The current study aligns with this viewpoint, regarding children as “co-constructors of knowledge who have worthwhile and insightful understandings of the world around them” (Janzen, 2008, p. 292). Furthermore, this thesis assumes that “the best people to provide information on the child’s perspective, actions and attitudes are children themselves” (Scott, 2004, p. 99).

To continue my exploration of the theoretical framework underpinning the thesis, I now discuss the work of Michel Foucault.

### **3.3 Foucault**

#### **3.3.1 Introduction**

Wright (2006) notes that it is the work of Foucault that has been most influential on poststructural/postmodern research in physical education. Foucault is widely regarded as one of the most influential thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Danaher *et al.*, 2007; MacNaughton, 2005), having played an important role in the development of postmodern and poststructural thinking (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007; MacNaughton, 2005). Much of Foucault’s work centres on the relationships between knowledge, truth and power, and the effects of these relationships on individuals and institutions (MacNaughton, 2005).

Foucault claims that ‘truth’ does not exist; rather, “what we hold to be true...is a fiction created through ‘truth games’ that express the politics of knowledge of the time and place” (MacNaughton, 2005, p. 5). Foucault (1991a) proposes that “each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth” (p. 73). By this, he means that every society has discourses which it accepts and makes function as true; mechanisms and instances which allow for the distinction between true and false statements; techniques and procedures that are accorded value in the acquisition of truth; and status afforded to those who are charged with saying what counts as true (Foucault, 1991a). In other words, discourses play a significant role in the constitution of ‘truth’ (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007).

### **3.3.2 Discourses**

The notion of discourse provides a means to understand the resources available to individuals as they make sense of the world and their place in it (Wright, 2004b). Discourses are bodies of ideas, concepts and beliefs that have become established as knowledge (Bilton *et al.*, 2002). Foucault (1973) describes discourses as sets of truths that are (re)produced through power relations and social practices operating in institutions, such as schools, prisons or, in this case, preschools. Certain discourses gain positions of power over others in the way they are supported and activated by individuals and institutions in society (Robinson & Jones Díaz, 2006). As Weedon (1997) asserts, “not all discourses carry equal weight or power” (p. 34). She explains that the most powerful discourses in society have firm bases in institutions such as the law, medicine and education. Such “institutional sites of discourse...function by the authority of what is ‘natural’ or ‘normal’” (Weedon, 1997, p. 95). According to Foucault (1998), “it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together” (p. 100). Techniques of power (e.g. disciplining individuals and exercising surveillance) operate in institutions such as schools and preschools in order to produce and constrain particular actions and practices (Evans & Davies, 2004b). Competing discourses work to become established as ‘normal’ and ‘ascendant’, leading to the codification of certain practices and knowledges. Concomitantly, alternative practices and knowledges are excluded (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Discourses, therefore, both privilege and legitimise, and exclude and marginalise (Cassidy, Jones & Potrac, 2004).

Within poststructuralism, discourses can be thought of as practices which produce meaning, form subjects and regulate conduct, within particular institutions and societies, at particular times (MacLure, 2003). Macdonald *et al.* (2002) remind us that discourses are productive, as they are “systems of beliefs and values that produce particular social practices and social relations” (p. 143). Danaher *et al.* (2007) suggest that discourses can be conceptualised as “language in action” (p. 31). They do not just reflect the social world, they construct it (Alldred & Burman, 2005) and therefore cannot be reduced to only language and speech (Foucault, 1974). In other words, discourses are not solely discursive; they are “practices that

systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1974, p. 49). As Dahlberg *et al.* (2007) explain, discourses are “not just linguistic, but are expressed and produced in our actions and practices, as well as in the environments we create” (p. 31). I take up this view in Chapter Five by describing preschool physical education discourses evident in both curricular and CPD documentation and as deployed at three preschools.

Discourses are instruments and effects of power, in that they both transmit and produce it (Foucault, 1998). Bilton *et al.* (2002) explain that, according to Foucault, discourses exercise power over us because they provide us with the language we use to think, and therefore ‘know’, about the world. We find ourselves talking about and doing certain things as if they are “natural and obvious, rather than the product of particular power relations” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 17). We are constantly subjected to discourse (Weedon, 1997) and thus it is through discourses that meanings, subjects and subjectivities are formed (Wright, 2004b). As O’Flynn (2004) explains, because of their intricate link with power, discourses are implicated in our subjectivity production.

While some of the above statements present quite a deterministic view of discourses and their operation, this study, as mentioned previously, aligns with Foucault’s notion of the technologies of the self and assumes that individuals are not merely passive recipients of discourse, but can demonstrate resistance and make choices. I acknowledge, however, that this may only be possible when individuals have been exposed to alternative discourses, or at least exposed to the notion that alternative discourses are possible. In this regard, it is important to note that different and contradictory discourses can circulate in the same place, at the same time (Foucault, 1998). Discourses (like power relations and subjectivities) are not stable and uniform; we should not “imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies” (Foucault, 1998, p. 100). Thus, as well as being instruments and



effects of power, discourses can be points of resistance and starting points for opposing strategies (Foucault, 1998).

Another important point with regard to the current study, which features a form of discourse analysis inspired by the work of Foucault, is that he is interested in how discourses function, rather than just the ‘truths’ that constitute them; “studying the history of ideas, as they evolve, is not my problem so much as trying to discern beneath them how one or another object could take shape as a possible object of knowledge” (Foucault, 2000a, p. 445). In other words, he is interested in investigating how discourses operate, rather than just their ‘content’. As he conceptualises truth and knowledge as socially constructed, Foucault is interested in how certain claims come to be accepted in particular times and contexts as if they were true knowledge (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007). He suggests that “perhaps it is time to study discourses not only in terms of their expressive value or formal transformations but according to their modes of existence” (Foucault, 2000b, p. 220). In Foucault’s view, then, the way discourses are articulated according to social relationships can be better understood by focusing on individuals and how they interpret discourses, rather than on “the themes or concepts that discourses set in motion” (Foucault, 2000b, p. 220). Consequently, in my analysis, I interrogate the ways in which individual participants engaged with particular discourses in order to construct their subjectivities. Furthermore, my analysis involves considering what is absent or silent in relation to particular discourses, as Foucault emphasises the importance of silences, marginalisations and exclusions (Ailwood, 2003a). He proposes that silences are elements that function “alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies...they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses” (Foucault, 1998, p. 27). Chapter Four explains how the discourse analysis conducted in this thesis aligns with and utilises Foucault’s work.

### **3.3.3 Power**

Foucault’s emphasis on the connection between truth, society and discourses demonstrates his belief that truth is inextricably linked with power. As Robinson and

Jones Díaz (2006) explain, according to Foucault, power operates through discourses that prevail in society, so his work provides “a theoretical framework for understanding how the world operated [sic] in terms of identity and power” (p. 29). Foucault (1991a) asserts that truth “is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extends it” (p. 74). His perception of power is not limited to the notion of it being top-down and repressive; on the contrary, he declares that power should be thought of as “a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression” (Foucault, 1991a, p. 61). In his view, conceiving of power as solely repressive means the productive aspect of power is ignored. Foucault (1991a) justifies his stance by asking, “if power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it?” (p. 61).

According to Foucault (1991a), rather than being a negative concept, power “traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse” (p. 61). He declares that we should stop describing the effects of power in solely negative terms such as exclusion, repression or concealment (Foucault, 1991c). Rather, we should admit “that power produces knowledge...that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without...knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute...power relations” (Foucault, 1991b, p. 175). In Foucaultian theory, knowledge and power are intricately linked: knowledge is a form of power; power is implicated in questions about whether and in what circumstances knowledge is applied or not; and knowledge, through power relations, can assume the authority of ‘truth’ and, by being applied in the real world, with real effects, make itself true (Hall, 2001). In other words, knowledge is both an instrument of power, and a product of the power relations that form dominant discourses (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Foucault again accentuates the relationship between knowledge and power in declaring that “power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him [sic] belong to this production” (1991c, p. 205).

Foucault believes that power is not something that is owned and used by particular individuals; rather, it is dispersed throughout society (Danaher *et al.*, 2007; Maynard, 2007). It is everywhere and ultimately nowhere in particular (Robinson & Jones Díaz, 2006). Foucault's view of power is not a deterministic one, whereby some people hold more power than others and exercise it at will, without resistance, to gain their desired ends (Ailwood, 2003a). He argues on several occasions that where there is power, there is also the potential for resistance (Ailwood, 2003a). In his opinion, "no matter how terrifying a given system may be, there always remain the possibilities of resistance, disobedience, and oppositional groupings" (Foucault, 1991d, p. 245). Power, according to Foucault, is fluid; it "moves around and through different groups, events, institutions and individuals, but nobody owns it" (Danaher *et al.*, 2007, p. 73). It is something that is exercised, rather than possessed (Foucault, 1991b). We are all caught up in these capillary-like power networks (Hall, 2001). Foucault (1993a) proposes that "no one, strictly speaking, has an official right to power; and yet it is always exerted in a particular direction, with some people on one side and some on the other" (p. 213). He also suggests that it is often difficult to say who holds power, but easy to see who lacks it (Foucault, 1993a).

I drew on Foucault's work around techniques of power (1982; 1991e; 1998) to investigate the discourses of physical education that had currency in the preschools in which I carried out my fieldwork, in order to examine the potential effects on preschool physical education practice, and therefore on practitioners and children. Numerous studies concerned with power in education have utilised Gore's (1995) framework of the major techniques of power, which she devised based on her belief that "the techniques of power which Foucault elaborated in prisons [are also] applicable to contemporary pedagogical practice" (p. 168). Foucault (1991e) himself compares practices at prisons with those at schools, asking, "Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?" (p. 228). The eight techniques of power Gore (1995) identified are:

- Surveillance (supervising, observing, watching, threatening to watch, expecting to be watched)

- Normalisation (defining the normal – invoking, requiring, setting or conforming to certain standards)
- Exclusion (the opposite of normalisation – defining the pathological)
- Classification (differentiating individuals or groups from one another – ranking and categorising)
- Distribution (the arrangement of bodies in space – for example, how they are arranged, isolated or separated)
- Individualisation (giving individual character to oneself or someone else)
- Totalisation (specifying collectivities, giving collective character, addressing or constructing whole groups)
- Regulation (controlling by rules, restrictions, sanctions, rewards and punishments).

Since discourses are instruments and effects of power (Foucault, 1998), Gore's framework helps to explain how discourses operate (Webb *et al.*, 2008). Researchers of both physical education and early childhood education have used the framework in their scholarship. Gore's own work (1995; 1997; 2002), primarily involving observations, analyses power relations at four different pedagogical sites. More recently, McCormack and Gore (2008), use the framework to investigate the role of power in teachers' induction. Webb and Macdonald (2007) use it to analyse interviews concerned with the underrepresentation of women in physical education leadership. Webb *et al.* (2008), investigating the construction of bodies and health in physical education, use Gore's framework to analyse documents, interviews, video-recordings and observations. Wright (2000a) draws on it when analysing language in a gymnastics class, while Wrench and Garrett (2008) use both Gore's framework and Foucault's technologies of the self to analyse questionnaires concerning fitness testing. Sumsion (2008), investigating preschoolers' portrayals of their male teacher, uses Gore's framework to analyse drawings and interviews, while Campbell (2008) uses it to analyse preschoolers' classroom interactions. Following these researchers, I used Gore's framework to interrogate the ways in which the discourses of physical education at the three preschools operated, and to investigate the ways in which the participants engaged with the discourses in order to construct their subjectivities. As

noted earlier, I also drew on Foucault's later conceptualisation of the technologies of the self (Foucault, 1992; 2000c).

### **3.3.4 Technologies of the self**

Foucault's work has been criticised by some researchers who believe it ignores notions of agency and change (Atencio & Wright, 2009; Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007; Markula, 2003; Robinson & Jones Díaz, 2006). However, admitting that he has perhaps previously "insisted too much on the technology of domination and power" (Foucault, 2000c, p. 225), his later work features a "conceptual shift...towards the notion that individuals can actively constitute and govern themselves" (Atencio & Wright, 2009, p. 34). Foucault (2000c) writes that he has become increasingly concerned with "technologies of individual domination...the mode of action that an individual exercises upon himself by means of the technologies of the self" (p. 225).

Foucault uses the word 'ethics' with regard to the 'technologies' or 'practices of the self'. His work around the 'ethical conduct' or 'care' of the self (1990; 1992; 1997) and his concept of the technologies of the self (2000c) refer to modes of self-governance. The concept of self-governance illustrates how individuals may refuse particular subjectivities by taking up specific technologies of the self. He explains that, while technologies of power determine individuals' conduct, submit them to domination and objectivise the subject, technologies of the self suggest that individuals may resist and disrupt prevailing power structures and discourses, and effect operations on themselves, in order to constitute subjectivities that lead to the pursuit of happiness and ethical lives (Foucault, 2000c). In other words, individuals have the freedom to transform themselves in order to become 'moral' subjects of their own actions and attain a certain state of, for example, happiness or wisdom. Rather than being conceptualised as passive receptors of culture, individuals are regarded to be actively involved in negotiating their subjectivities (O'Flynn, 2004). Technologies of the self propose that individuals choose to invest in certain discourses over others (Atencio & Wright, 2009). They involve "reflection on modes of living, on choices of existence, on the way to regulate one's behavior" (Foucault, 2000d, p. 89). Practising technologies of the self entails "making visible,

deconstructing, problematising and questioning dominant discourses and the constructions and practices they produce” (Maynard, 2007, pp. 384-385).

Wright *et al.* (2006), in an investigation of young people’s constructions of health and fitness, propose that Foucault’s technologies of the self are useful in providing ways of understanding how individuals take up (or resist) particular imperatives. Describing technologies of the self as “practices in which individuals engage to construct their sense of self” (p. 708), Wright *et al.* maintain that they provide the means to look for such practices in what individuals say and do, and explain why certain practices are pursued rather than others. Technologies of the self provide the means to move beyond a determining view of discourse to an understanding of individuals as having opportunities to be reflective and to make choices (Wright *et al.*, 2006).

Foucault (1992) outlines four aspects of his concept of the “ethical subject” (p. 26) and the way we relate to our selves through technologies of the self. The first aspect is called “the determination of the ethical substance” (p. 26) and refers to the part of the self that individuals work on to be transformed and become ethical subjects. For instance, in relation to physical education, individuals may choose to work on their bodies. The second aspect of the technologies of the self is called “the mode of subjection” (p. 27) and refers to the ‘rules’ that oblige individuals to engage in practices in order to be transformed. This aspect is concerned with the reasons individuals engage in these practices. For instance, in relation to the physical education example, individuals may want to work on their bodies because of scientific ‘truths’ that link exercise with health. The third aspect refers to “ethical work” (p. 27), and is concerned with the practices individuals perform on themselves in order to be transformed into ethical subjects. To again use the physical education example, examples of ethical work individuals may engage in to work on their bodies, because of scientific ‘truths’ related to health, could include self-monitoring in relation to exercise and eating practices. The fourth aspect of the technologies of the self is called “the telos of the ethical subject” (p. 27). This aspect is concerned with the pattern or goal of the ethical work; it pertains to “the establishing of a moral

conduct that commits an individual...to a certain mode of being” (p. 28). Following the mode of being to reach the moral goal requires the individual “to act upon himself [sic], to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself [sic]” (p. 28). In relation to the physical education example, individuals may engage in particular patterns of exercise and dieting in order to work towards leading ‘healthy’ lifestyles and thus being ‘healthy’ subjects.

Foucault (2000d) describes technologies of the self as procedures individuals employ “in order to determine their identity, maintain it, or transform it...through relations of self-mastery or self-knowledge” (p. 87). Self-reflection and self-examination are further examples of technologies of the self (Foucault, 1992). O’Flynn (2004) explains that another useful technology of the self is ‘othering’, which involves an individual referring to the practices of other people in order to differentiate and classify his or her own practices. For instance, in relation to the physical education example above, an individual would indicate that he or she was deeply invested in healthism if he or she referred to other people’s ‘unhealthy’ physical activity or eating practices as, for instance, ‘wrong’ or ‘disgusting’.

Engaging in these technologies of the self encourages the development of critical self-awareness, which, according to Markula (2003), is the most important aspect of technologies of the self. Critical self-awareness involves constantly questioning what is ‘natural’ or inevitable in one’s identity and therefore creating an identity of one’s own (Markula, 2004). Jones and Aitchison (2007) explain that when resistant and empowering practices are combined with critical awareness, they can be defined as technologies of the self. As an example, these authors propose that dieting and exercising can be considered to be technologies of the self if people engage in them in order to consciously transform themselves in ways that counter dominant discourses. In this way, technologies of the self are different from coping mechanisms; while coping mechanisms are reactions to power relations, technologies of the self involve “an embodied conscious self” (Jones & Aitchison, 2007, p. 54). Dahlberg *et al.* (2007) explain that thought is of central importance to technologies of the self; they define thought in this context as “a form of criticism which enables

us to question, or deconstruct, the way we view the world and our relation to it” (p. 34). In Chapter Seven, I show how I interrogated the participants’ interview texts for evidence of such thought and critical awareness, but as Thorpe (2008) asserts, “mere critical thinking does not transform...discursive constructions” (p. 217). It was vital, therefore, to also be concerned with how such critique works in practice (Thorpe, 2008). Thus, I also interrogated the interview texts for incidences of critical *practices*. I also looked for examples of such practices in my field-notes.

A point of particular relevance to this thesis is that other examples of technologies of the self are confession and truth telling (Besley, 2005). The interviews, my main method of data generation, were a confession-like situation in that I asked the participants questions and listened to the responses they ‘confessed’, with the hope that they would tell the ‘truth’ about themselves (Besley, 2005) in those particular moments. Foucault (1993b) describes confession and self-examination as among the most important technologies of the self, which are “oriented toward the discovery and the formulation of the truth concerning oneself” (p. 204). According to Rose (1989, cited in Besley, 2005), confession involves self-scrutiny, self-evaluation, self-regulation and self-inspection.

In Chapter Seven, I draw on the technologies of the self to examine the complex ways in which the participants were actively involved in taking up particular discourses of preschool physical education. This allowed me to understand the participants not merely as “receptors of or the *effects* of discourse, but as desiring subjects involved in their own self-constitution” (O’Flynn, 2004, p. 11, emphasis in original). However, as I had not come across research that utilised technologies of the self in studies with young children, I was unsure about the extent to which preschool children would engage in technologies of the self. While aligning with research that emphasises children’s agency, I neither wanted to underestimate nor overestimate their abilities. Therefore, as well as looking for technologies of the self, I, as mentioned earlier, also examined if and how the techniques of power outlined in Gore’s (1995) framework impacted on how the children constructed their subjectivities. I felt that this was equally important with regard to the adults; since



techniques of power will also have impacted on how the adults formed their subjectivities, I also examined their interview texts, along with the field-notes, in this manner.

Interrogating the texts for both techniques of power and technologies of the self illustrates engagement with the poststructural problematisation of dualistic thinking (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007). It reflects Foucault's contention that "both technologies of domination and technologies of the self produce effects that constitute the self" (Besley, 2005, p. 77). It also aligns with the analysis grid conceptualised by Fenech and Sumsion (2007), who conducted a Foucaultian investigation of early childhood teachers' perceptions of regulation. These authors conceptualised a grid comprised of two axes; the constraining axis (which focuses on power) and the freedom axis (which features notions such as freedom, agency, resistance and critical thought). My approach to analysis is explained in Chapter Four.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

This chapter has detailed the poststructural, Foucaultian theoretical framework that underpins the thesis. It has particularly focused on Foucault's work around discourses, power and subjectivities. By discussing his notion of the technologies of the self, it has shown that, rather than aligning with a deterministic view of discourses and their operation, I am committed to an approach which also emphasises resistance, agency and the ways in which individuals are engaged in their own self-formation. In this way, both techniques of power and technologies of the self were important elements of my analysis. I employed these notions in my interrogation of the physical education discourses at three preschools, in order to examine how they were negotiated and taken up by practitioners and children in order to constitute their subjectivities. This thesis raises critical questions about particular ascendant and competing discourses in order to evaluate and problematise the 'work' they can do in relation to practice. Chapter Four explains how I have done this.



## **Chapter 4 – Methodology**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter outlines the decisions and steps taken regarding data generation and data analysis. The study was designed to answer the primary research question, which is:

- What is the place and meaning of ‘physical education’ to practitioners and children at three preschool contexts in a city in Scotland?

In order to investigate this question, the following subset of questions was addressed:

- What are the discourses of physical education at these preschools?
- How do practitioners and children engage with these discourses in order to construct their subjectivities regarding physical education?

The chapter begins with a discussion of the data generation procedure. This is followed by a brief section concerning research quality. Finally, I detail the process of data analysis.

### **4.2 Data generation**

#### **4.2.1 Introduction**

Decisions regarding data generation were informed by the research questions and the poststructural, Foucaultian theoretical framework. The theories and methods employed are closely intertwined. As explained in Chapter Three, poststructural perspectives are concerned with interrogating discourses. The research questions required me to identify the physical education discourses at three preschools and investigate the ways in which practitioners and children engaged with these discourses; the study therefore involved discourse analysis. My poststructural approach to analysis differs significantly from discourse analytic scholarship associated with formal linguistics (Burrows, 1999). Following Wright (2004b), I employed a type of discourse analysis that is concerned with identifying patterns in language use. My intention was to identify prevailing discourses of physical education at the preschools, and to interrogate and problematise the ‘work’ of these discourses. I aimed to ‘disrupt’ and ‘unravel’ discourses which may have appeared to

be natural or unquestionable (MacLure, 2003). Rossi *et al.* (2009) propose that there are no fixed rules when implementing this type of discourse analysis, although the use of social theory is prominent. In my analysis, then, I utilised Foucaultian theoretical tools in order to interrogate the ways physical education discourses and related power relations circulated (Burrows, 2010b) at the preschools.

Since discourse analysis is an approach to analysis, rather than data generation, it does not prescribe a specific set of research methods (Alldred & Burman, 2005). According to Macdonald *et al.* (2002), poststructural research generally involves a qualitative approach. Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, where they try to make sense of phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Such research seeks to capture what people have to say in their own words. Patton (2002) proposes that qualitative data are gathered through in-depth, open-ended interviews, observation and written documents. Poststructural researchers usually employ these methods too (Macdonald *et al.*, 2002). Employing these methods aligned with the approach to discourse analysis I took. Analysis involved the following two steps, proposed by Wright (2004b):

1. Identifying and analysing institutional and cultural texts that were likely to serve as sources of the discourses
2. Examining how particular discourses were taken up by individuals, by identifying patterns of meaning-making.

The first step entailed analysing the physical education sections of the curricular documentation used at the settings (Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence), and analysing texts related to preschool physical education CPD (Early Moves) that six of the practitioners had experienced. The second step required interrogating participants' talk. In order to analyse patterns in language use, I conducted interviews with adults, a group drawing and discussion activity with children, and interviews with children. I also engaged in participant observation at each preschool.

#### **4.2.2 Selecting the preschools**

The study required an in-depth, qualitative approach; a large-scale quantitative approach, involving a large number of preschools and participants, would have been

inappropriate, as it would not have allowed for the “*depth and detail*” required (Patton, 1983, p. 22, emphasis in original). For this reason, a small sample of preschools was used. I focused on three settings, rather than just one or two, so I could investigate and highlight similarities and differences regarding physical education at three different contexts.

Since qualitative studies are not usually concerned with making generalisations, random sampling is rarely relevant (Malterud, 2001). Rather, purposeful sampling is employed, whereby the sample is “intentionally selected according to the needs of the study” (Coyne, 1997, p. 629). I therefore purposefully selected the three preschools. I also engaged in convenience sampling in that I approached two preschools in which I had had previous contact with potential gatekeepers. There was also snowball sampling in that, when I had difficulty in recruiting a third preschool, I approached a setting one of my supervisors had previously had contact with. The settings eventually recruited were Oakdale<sup>7</sup>, Cheery Faces and Sunnyland. They differed in terms of size, socio-economic status (SES) and staff experience of CPD.

Oakdale nursery is attached to a primary school, meaning it is council-run. Cheery Faces is a large, partner-provider childcare facility, meaning it is privately run, but its preschool education is provided in partnership with the council. Sunnyland is also a partner-provider nursery, but it is much smaller than Cheery Faces and also differs in that it is located at a university campus and owned by a university. It too provides preschool education in partnership with the council. While Cheery Faces caters for children from six months of age up to five-and-a-half, Sunnyland accepts children from two-and-a-half years of age. Therefore, while many children attending Cheery Faces are there for its childcare provision and so do not experience the preschool curriculum, all those attending Sunnyland do, as do all children attending Oakdale nursery. Table 4.1 below details the numbers of children and practitioners at each setting.

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<sup>7</sup> The names of the preschools and of all participants have been changed in order to ensure anonymity.

The settings also differ in terms of social class contexts. Oakdale is located in an urban area that would commonly be described as being of low SES. In my initial meeting with Amanda – the nursery teacher there when fieldwork began – she explained that it “is in a socially deprived area, with children coming from a wide range of backgrounds. It is very ethnically diverse, and quite a few families have contact with social workers” (Oakdale field-notes, 20-January-2010). There were originally 20 children from Oakdale participating in the study, but approximately two months after fieldwork began, one child left the nursery after being taken into emergency foster care. Of the remaining 19 children, five spoke another language along with English. One child, Janusz, spoke little English when fieldwork began (Polish was his first language), but as the year went on, his English language skills and vocabulary developed rapidly. Sixteen of the 19 children were ‘white’.

Cheery Faces, in contrast, is located in a suburban area that would commonly be described as ‘upper/middle class’. There was little evidence of ethnic diversity; all 12 participating children were ‘white’ and spoke English as their first (and seemingly only) language.

The SES of Sunnyland is not as easily defined as those of Oakdale and Cheery Faces. Children attending Sunnyland come from a variety of backgrounds; some children’s parents are students at the university, others’ parents are members of staff there, while others are not connected with the university, except perhaps that they live near it. Sunnyland is situated in an urban area. There was some ethnic diversity; of the 18 children who participated in group mind-mapping (a group drawing and discussion activity) and interviews, three were not ‘white’.

**Table 4.1: Oakdale, Cheery Faces and Sunnyland – demographic information**

	Type of setting	Location/ SES	Age of children	Number of children	Number of practitioners
<b>Oakdale</b>	Attached to primary school (council run)	Urban (low SES)	3 – 5 years	20 in each of two nursery classes	2 (plus learning assistant and physical education teacher)
<b>Cheery Faces</b>	Partner-provider (private; preschool education in partnership with council)	Suburban (upper/middle class)	6 months – 5½ years	75 at a time (130 on roll; 35 preschoolers)	22 (5 in preschool rooms)
<b>Sunnyland</b>	Partner-provider (owned by a university; preschool education in partnership with council)	Urban (mixed SES, mainly middle class)	2½ – 5 years	24 at a time (37 on roll)	5

All participating practitioners were female and ‘white’. The preschools differed in terms of the women’s experiences of CPD related to preschool physical education. For instance, at Oakdale, both Amanda and the physical education specialist, Tanya, had participated in a three-part Early Moves CPD course (a day and two evenings) with the Developmental Physical Education Group (DPEG)<sup>8</sup> at the University of Edinburgh. The practitioners at Cheery Faces had engaged in a one-day Early Moves course, while those at Sunnyland had not participated in Early Moves or any other preschool physical education CPD. I included these contexts as I envisaged that if practitioners had engaged in CPD related to preschool physical education, then something must have been happening at these settings regarding physical education – even if that something was just a recognition that CPD related to physical education was worth engaging with. I wanted to investigate if and how the level of involvement impacted on physical education at the settings.

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<sup>8</sup> I am a member of this group, but in a research capacity – I have not been involved with designing or presenting CPD courses. The work of the DPEG is discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.

#### **4.2.3 Preparation for approaching the preschools**

Before fieldwork began, I intended to provide practitioners and the children's parents with participant information sheets and consent forms (see Appendices A-D). This was to ensure they were not deceived about the study in any way. The participant information sheets provided information regarding participants' rights to withdraw and to be debriefed about the study. Regarding this latter point, I provided my contact details and stated that participants and parents could contact me to access results and publications arising from the study. The participant information sheets and consent forms also assured participants and parents of confidentiality.

I adhered to the Moray House School of Education's ethical guidelines and procedures and, as is explained later in the chapter, sought and received their ethical approval for the study. Since I align with research that views children as agents, I believe that as well as seeking parental consent regarding the children's participation, it was important to seek consent from the children themselves. The British Educational Research Association's (BERA's) 'Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research' (2004) proposes that researchers must comply with Article 12 of the 'United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child', which declares that children who are able to form their own views should "be facilitated to give fully informed consent" (BERA, 2004, p. 7). Seeking children's consent is important for addressing the adult-child power imbalance. Research underpinned by a postmodern perspective understands that children's relationships with adults are "woven with power, and concerns regarding power hierarchies are considered within the structure of the research project itself" (Janzen, 2008, p. 292). Having the opportunity to give or deny consent gives children a sense of control (Weithorn & Sherer, 1994, cited in Hill, 2005). However, since it would have been inappropriate to provide preschool children with participant information sheets and consent forms, I sought their *assent* to participate (Gallagher, 2010a). While parental consent was sought at the beginning of the study, throughout the research process, children were asked if they were willing to participate in group mind-mapping and interviews. Thus, ethical considerations were taken into account throughout the period of fieldwork, not just regarded as something to be taken care of at the start (Hill, 2005).



Another step I took regarding ethics was receiving Enhanced Disclosure from Disclosure Scotland (which provides criminal record checks). I then started contacting preschools.

#### **4.2.4 Approaching the preschools**

A colleague in the DPEG<sup>9</sup> provided me with contact details for Amanda at Oakdale, who I had met very briefly at a presentation in 2009. At our initial meeting, I showed Amanda and Alison (the nursery nurse) drafts of the participant information sheets and consent forms. They proposed minor changes to make the documentation more accessible for parents. After I made the changes, the participant information was displayed, in poster form, in a prominent position on the notice-board, and Amanda and Alison gave parents consent forms. When all 20 consent forms had been signed, I began my observations at Oakdale. It was the start of March 2010.

The colleague who gave me Amanda's contact details also provided contact details for Rachel at Cheery Faces. I had met Rachel on a number of occasions in 2009 when I helped colleagues with a research project at Cheery Faces related to assessing children's movement. Rachel said she was happy for the nursery to participate in the study. She said she would organise a group of approximately ten or 12 preschool children, all of whom would be still there after the summer, to participate. When Rachel had a group of 12 preschoolers whose parents had signed consent forms, I began my observations there. It was the start of April 2010.

I suspected it would be more difficult to gain access to a preschool where practitioners had not undertaken CPD with the DPEG, as they may not have been familiar with the DPEG and therefore may have been unsure about participating. Intending to include a nursery that, unlike Oakdale, was not attached to a primary school and, unlike Cheery Faces, was not a large, private childcare facility, I first contacted a small, city centre, council-run nursery school. The headteacher met with me and said she would discuss the study with her colleagues to see if they would be

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<sup>9</sup> This colleague had contact details for Amanda and Rachel because of their involvement in Early Moves CPD.

willing to participate. A few weeks later, she informed me they were not interested in participating.

I located contact details for a number of other preschools on the internet (using the council's and the settings' own websites). Two more settings declined to participate, while I got no reply from a third. I decided at this point to contact Sunnyland. One of my supervisors informed me she had approached the manager of Sunnyland, Jean, in the past regarding a different study – which did not go ahead in the end for reasons unrelated to Sunnyland – and found her to be supportive and interested in participating. When I contacted Jean, she expressed her support for the study and informed me of the procedure regarding doing research at Sunnyland. It was different from what I had experienced at Oakdale and Cheery Faces. Because Sunnyland is based on a university campus – within a psychology department – the children regularly participate in research projects. Therefore, when parents enrol children at Sunnyland, they are given consent forms regarding the children's participation in research studies. This is so that every time a researcher requests the children's participation in a study, more consent forms do not have to be signed.

Jean informed me of three requirements if my study was to go ahead at Sunnyland. Firstly, I would have to provide an Enhanced Disclosure certificate. Secondly, I needed to complete a form, providing specific details about the study, which Jean and a lecturer in the psychology department would have to approve. Thirdly, I was required to show proof of ethical clearance from the Moray House School of Education Ethics Committee. I was not expecting to have to go through the Ethics Committee, as according to their guidelines, my study did not require me to. However, as Jean requested me to do so, I did. I forwarded the email of ethical approval I received from the Ethics Committee to Jean, and provided her with the other documentation she had requested.

I also gave Jean a poster to put on the notice-board. I felt that, while it was understandable that she would not want to have to deal with consent forms every time a student or researcher came to do research, it was important that parents were

aware of what I was doing. The poster contained all the details a participant information sheet and consent form would contain, and Jean placed it in a prominent position on the notice-board inside the main door.

When fieldwork began at Sunnyland, Jean requested that every time a child took part in group mind-mapping or an interview, I record it on a card unique to that child kept in a filing box in Jean's office. She said this was necessary so she had a record of all research the children participated in. She told me that one child, who had no card, was not allowed to participate in research, as her parents had not consented for her to do so. (This was also the case with another child who started at Sunnyland after the summer.)

I began my observations at Sunnyland at the end of April 2010, meaning that by this point, I was doing weekly observations at each setting. I now discuss the research methods employed.

#### **4.2.5 Data generation methods**

As mentioned, the study involved discourse analysis and featured the research methods of observation, interviews with adults, group mind-mapping with children and interviews with children. I begin by focusing on observation.

#### **Observations**

The research method initially employed at each preschool was participant observation. On a weekly basis, I observed the children's 'physical education' and wrote field-notes in a notebook. Immediately afterwards, I typed up the field-notes on my computer.

I felt it was important to do observations for numerous reasons. Firstly, the observations informed the interviews and mind-mapping sessions, by allowing me to gain an understanding of the contexts and what 'physical education' at each entailed. Doing observations and writing accompanying field-notes also meant I was not solely reliant on participants' talk. Scraton, Caudwell and Holland (2005)

recommend the use of multiple research methods, proposing that interviews alone cannot capture individuals' everyday lived experiences. Doing observations ensured that the study featured methodological triangulation, which Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2005) define as "the use of two or more methods of data collection in the study of some aspect of human behaviour" (p. 112). These authors cite Campbell and Fiske (1959) in proposing that triangulation is a powerful means of demonstrating that research is valid, as relying exclusively on one research method could bias the researcher's view of what is being investigated.

Another reason I felt it was important to conduct observations, particularly at the beginning of fieldwork, was that I wanted to get to know the participants, and give them a chance to get to know me, before I asked them to participate in group mind-mapping and interviews. I felt that this was especially important regarding the children. Numerous researchers agree with this point. For instance, Mooney and Blackburn (2003), who investigated children's views of childcare quality, assert that researchers must spend time with the children so that positive relationships can develop and the children can feel relaxed. Similarly, Almqvist *et al.* (2006), who investigated four- and five-year-olds' perceptions of health, explain that before conducting interviews with the children, they spent time at their preschools in order to create comfortable relationships. Aligning with this viewpoint, Coates and Coates (2006), whose research involved three- to five-year-olds, found that success in eliciting drawings and narratives from the children was dependent on having positive relationships "in a non-threatening context, based on mutual trust and a familiarity of the situations in which the children worked" (p. 226). In order to gain this familiarity, I felt it was vital to conduct observations at the preschools for a number of weeks before asking children to participate in the other research methods. I felt that this familiarisation process was also important for the adult participants.

Clark, McQuail and Moss (2003) note that observation is a research method that is often used in the early childhood field. Similarly, Stacey (practitioner at Oakdale) mentioned that preschools frequently have students in conducting observations. She described students doing observations as "part of the normal life of the nursery"

(Oakdale field-notes, 8-September-2010). I therefore envisaged that having me doing observations would not be a strange situation for the participants. Although I was generally sitting in what I hoped were inconspicuous positions so as not to distract the participants, doing observations gave me the chance to, for example, smile at and briefly chat with them. Children often came over to ask what I was doing and why. I was honest in my explanations, as reflected in the following extract from my field-notes:

Lily, who has been running around the yard, comes over and asks what I am doing. I explain that I'm writing down all of the activities that the children are doing. She asks me why I'm doing this. I say that I'm doing a big project and that this is like my homework. (Sunnyland field-notes, 15-June-2010)

Being honest was important in relation to ethics. As mentioned earlier, individual children's assent was explicitly sought each time they participated in group mind-mapping and interviews, but it was not easy to do this regarding observations (Gallagher, 2010b). I worried about distracting them, and also knew it was not possible in terms of time. However, as the excerpt above shows, I tried to make the reasons for my presence as transparent as possible for the children.

I envisaged that spending the first few weeks doing observations and getting to know the participants would mean that when I asked them to participate in other research methods, I was not a 'stranger' and they would feel more comfortable and willing to participate. While aware that getting to know the children (and adults) and building up relationships with them would not guarantee that data generated would be of high quality, I felt that such an approach would increase the likelihood that it would be. Table 4.2 shows that, throughout the period of fieldwork, I conducted a total of 70 observations:

**Table 4.2: Total number of observations**

<b>Preschool setting</b>	<b>Observations</b>
Oakdale	28
Cheery Faces	22
Sunnyland	20
<b>Total</b>	<b>70</b>

### Observations at Oakdale

Oakdale was the first setting I started my fieldwork at. I began my observations there on the third of March 2010. When fieldwork began, the observations involved 20 children and four practitioners. One child left the nursery in May. After the summer, 11 more had moved on, while another boy left at the beginning of October.

Therefore, of the original 20 children, seven were involved for the entire period of fieldwork. Since new children started at the nursery in August, however, there were always up to 20 children present during observations. Specific references to any children who started after the summer, and thus did not have consent to participate in the study, are not included in the thesis. This also applies to any non-participating adults who were occasionally present during observations. After the summer, Amanda was no longer teaching the nursery class, so Stacey, the new nursery teacher, also joined the study. In total, therefore, the number of participants at Oakdale was five adults and 20 children.

During my initial meeting with Amanda, she explained that the children had physical education lessons in the gym hall every Wednesday from 9am until 9.50am. Twenty-one of my 28 observations were of these lessons. Before the summer, the lessons took place from approximately 9am until 9.50am, while from August onwards, they took place from approximately 9.50am until 10.40am. Observations in the gym hall usually lasted about 40 minutes, as the 50 minutes allocated for the lesson included the time it took to get to the gym hall and back to the nursery afterwards.

Along with their weekly physical education lessons, the children had daily opportunities to go outside to a small playground. The playground, which was accessible from the nursery classroom, was exclusively used by the preschool children (it was fenced off from the school's main playground). Apart from a wooden playhouse that was a permanent feature, the playground contained various equipment that was not always out at the same time, including: a wooden climbing frame with monkey bars and a slide, a wooden rocking boat, a sand-pit, tyres, bicycles, tricycles, scooters, wooden balance beams, toy pushchairs, and pieces of small equipment (e.g. hula hoops, balls). On four occasions, I observed the

participants outside in the playground, and three times, I conducted observations in the nursery. Some observations concerning the gym hall also included brief amounts of time in the nursery directly before and after physical education. I felt it was important to observe these different situations, as both the adults and children spoke about activities outside of the structured physical education lessons in their interviews. I also felt that observing these situations would help me gain a greater understanding of the nursery context more widely.

Observations were generally conducted over periods of approximately 30-50 minutes, depending on when the particular situation I was observing ended. On some occasions, I conducted two separate observations in the same morning (e.g. on the tenth of March 2010, I observed the physical education lesson, and afterwards did an observation in the playground). Table 4.3 details the type and number of observations conducted at Oakdale:

**Table 4.3: Oakdale observations**

<b>Gym hall (physical education lesson)</b>	<b>Playground (outdoor play)</b>	<b>Nursery</b>	<b>Total</b>
21	4	3	<b>28</b>

### Observations at Cheery Faces

I began doing observations at Cheery Faces on the first of April 2010, attending on Thursdays from approximately 11am until 11.40am. Rachel indicated that this particular timeslot was convenient for her and the other participants. As noted previously, parental consent was received for 12 children at Cheery Faces to participate in the study. There were four adult participants (one of whom was Rachel, who was very rarely present during observations). One participating practitioner, Sarah, left the nursery during the summer, while one child left in September. As at Oakdale, there were occasions when children and staff who had not consented to participate were present during observations. Specific references to these people are not included in the thesis. In total, the number of participants at Cheery Faces was four adults and 12 children.

Observations at Cheery Faces lasted between 30 and 40 minutes. They usually took place outside in the garden/playground, but I observed the participants indoors on four occasions, when they did indoor ‘physical education’ activities. The children had daily opportunities to use outdoor spaces that were filled with similar equipment to that in the playground at Oakdale. The outdoor area, which the participants referred to as ‘the garden’, consisted of two adjoining spaces separated by a wall with a gate – ‘the play park’ and a small yard. The surface of the play park was covered with bark. It contained a large permanent wooden fixture featuring two swings, a trapeze-type swing with handles, a ladder, monkey bars, a tree-house and a slide. This fixture took up approximately half of the play park. In the remaining space, there was a hen house, greenhouse and vegetable patch. There was a large wooden playhouse in the corner; it seemed to be used as a shed, however, as I never saw children going into it. Along with these large features, there were small items of children’s gardening equipment (e.g. shovels, rakes, wheelbarrows).

The other section of the garden had an artificial turf surface, with concrete around the outside. It contained a variety of small equipment that could be stored together in one section of the space. This equipment included: two wooden balance beams, plastic ‘stepping stones’, a wooden rocking boat, a small trampoline, various tricycles and vehicles, waffle blocks, hula hoops, beanbags, balls, shuttlecocks and racquets.

The children’s indoor ‘physical education’ took place in an open space just inside the entrance to the setting. At mealtimes, it was set up with tables and chairs, but outside of these times, it was available for other activities, such as *Sticky Kids*<sup>10</sup>, which I observed the children participating in on three occasions. In one corner, there was a soft play area containing foam equipment the children could play with and climb on. On some occasions, this corner featured a ball pond, as well as a wooden climbing wall, which was installed as a permanent feature there towards the end of the period of fieldwork.

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<sup>10</sup> *Sticky Kids* is a series of compact discs featuring songs that encourage children to engage in physically vigorous movements and activities.



Table 4.4 details the type and number of observations conducted at Cheery Faces:

**Table 4.4: Cheery Faces observations**

Garden			Nursery			Total
Free play only	Adult guided activities only	Both	Free play only	Adult guided activities only	Both	
11	1	6	1	2	1	
<b>18</b>			<b>4</b>			<b>22</b>

#### Observations at Sunnyland

I began doing observations at Sunnyland on the 27<sup>th</sup> of April 2010, attending on Tuesday mornings, usually from approximately 11.15am until 12 noon. Tuesday was a day that suited both me and, according to Jean, the participants at Sunnyland. Jean recommended that I should arrive at 11.15am, as this was the time the staff and children usually went to the garden on Tuesdays. The observations before the summer involved five adults and 23 children. Another child was regularly present, but as her parents had not consented to her participation, there are no specific references to this child in the thesis. This also applies to any non-participating adults who were occasionally present during observations. After the summer, 14 of the 23 participating children left the nursery (along with the non-participating child), and 15 new children started. Fourteen of these new children had parental consent to participate in research studies, while one child did not. One participating child left the nursery at the end of October, and his place was taken by another child, who also had permission to participate. This meant that, in total, there were 38 child participants at Sunnyland (i.e. 23+14+1), along with five adults.

Observations at Sunnyland usually lasted between approximately 20 and 40 minutes, depending on when the particular situation I was observing ended. As alluded to, the observations often took place in the garden. Getting to the garden involved following a series of corridors and flights of stairs within the university. Despite not being directly located beside the nursery's indoor areas, the garden was exclusively used by the children attending Sunnyland. It was surrounded by buildings on two sides and high walls on the others. It had an artificial turf surface, with a concrete pavement around the outside. There were trees, plants and shrubs in the garden, as well as a

large flowerbed and vegetable patch. Similar to the playgrounds at Oakdale and Cheery Faces, it contained a variety of equipment. When fieldwork began, this equipment included: a large plastic climbing frame with a slide, a small plastic climbing frame and slide, a plastic and metal slide with a ladder, a small plastic playhouse, two stand-alone basketball nets, a sand-pit and two tyres. The practitioners also frequently took smaller equipment out of a cupboard in the garden for the children to use. This equipment included: hula hoops, balls, beanbags, space hoppers, scooters, and various bicycles, tricycles and vehicles. I also saw the children playing with dress-up clothes on numerous occasions. Approximately a month after fieldwork began, the nursery received delivery of a large wooden playhouse. Towards the end of the period of fieldwork, a new, large wooden fixture arrived. It featured a tree-house, ladder, slide and tunnel.

On some occasions, I observed the participants indoors. There were numerous reasons for this. Firstly, at the beginning of the period of fieldwork, Jean advised me to do some observations inside the nursery in order to help the participants and me become familiar with each other. This relates to my second reason, which was that I felt that observing the participants indoors would help me gain a greater understanding of the nursery context more widely. A third reason was that the participants often spoke about indoor activities and situations in their interviews. A final reason related to the weather: on the two occasions I observed the participants doing *Sticky Kids*, bad weather meant they could not go outside. Table 4.5 details the type and number of observations conducted at Sunnyland:

**Table 4.5: Sunnyland observations**

<b>Garden</b>	<b>Nursery</b>	<b>Nursery (<i>Sticky Kids</i>)</b>	<b>Total</b>
11	7	2	<b>20</b>

As noted, I conducted 70 observations in total. I stopped doing observations when I felt I was no longer learning anything new about the contexts or specifically about ‘physical education’ at them. I did more observations at Oakdale than at Cheery Faces and Sunnyland because the children there experienced a weekly physical education lesson, as well as opportunities for less structured physical activities and

physical play, as happened at Cheery Faces and Sunnyland; in a way, there was more ‘physical education’ for me to observe at Oakdale than at the other settings.

Shortly after starting fieldwork at each preschool, I began conducting interviews with the adult participants. I now discuss this research method.

### *Interviews with adults*

According to Fontana and Frey (2000), research interviews are “one of the most common and powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow human beings” (p. 645). During the course of my fieldwork, I interviewed 14 adults. I originally intended to select participants based on them being directly involved in the ‘physical education’ of the child participants. I intended for them to each participate in three interviews over the course of 2010. The adults were given participant information sheets and asked to sign consent forms (see Appendices C and D).

At Oakdale, my original adult participants were Amanda (nursery teacher), Alison (nursery nurse), Dawn (learning assistant) and Tanya (physical education specialist). As noted previously, after the summer, Amanda was no longer teaching the nursery classes. She was, however, still teaching at Oakdale school and was eager to remain involved in the study, which I was pleased for her to do. I felt it was important that the new nursery teacher, Stacey, had the opportunity to participate and she too was keen to be involved. Table 4.6 displays information the five women provided about their backgrounds as regards training and qualifications:

**Table 4.6: Oakdale adults (5)**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Job title</b>	<b>Qualifications</b>	<b>Started at Oakdale</b>
Amanda (Sheridan)	Primary school teacher (nursery up to June 2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Bachelor of Science (BSc) (Outdoor Education with Environmental Science)</li> <li>➤ Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) [2007]</li> </ul>	2007 (Nursery 2008)
Tanya (Walters)	Physical education teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Bachelor of Education (Physical Education) [2002]</li> <li>➤ Currently doing Postgraduate Certificate (3-14 Physical Education)</li> </ul>	2006
Alison (Jenkins)	Nursery nurse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ National Certificate (NC)</li> <li>➤ Higher NC (HNC)</li> <li>➤ Personal Development Award (PDA)</li> <li>➤ Currently doing Bachelor of Arts (BA) (Childhood Practice)</li> </ul>	2003 (Nursery 2005)
Dawn (Page)	Learning assistant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ No qualifications necessary</li> <li>➤ Qualified sick children's nurse</li> </ul>	2000
Stacey (West)	Primary school teacher (nursery from August 2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Master of Arts (Social Anthropology with Development)</li> <li>➤ Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) [2009]</li> </ul>	2009 (Nursery 2010)

My original adult participants at Cheery Faces were Vanessa and Serena. Vanessa was the 'leader' of the group of children who were participating in the study, while Serena was the overall preschool 'room leader'. After doing observations for a number of weeks, I wondered about the possibility of holding interviews with another practitioner, Sarah, as she too had accompanied the children outside on numerous occasions. I noticed that Sarah interacted with the children in a different way to Vanessa and Serena. She tended to take a more proactive, leading role in what they did, as the following extract from my field-notes illustrates:

...[Sarah] announces to the group that she has a game that they can join in on if they want. She says that if they don't want to join in, it's fine. Only one child – Chuck – doesn't come over to join in. Sarah sets a cone onto the

ground. She explains to the children that the aim of the game is to roll a ball to try and hit the cone. (Cheery Faces field-notes, 15-April-2010)

As Sarah was leaving Cheery Faces at the end of the summer, I was unable to do follow-up interviews with her, so she participated in just one interview. Although adult participants were selected based on their involvement in the children's 'physical education', I also decided it was important to have one interview with Rachel. Although she was not directly involved in the children's 'physical education', I felt that an interview with the owner and manager would provide contextual and background information, both about the nursery generally and about 'physical education' there. Rachel said she was happy to participate and, like Sarah, took part in one interview. Table 4.7 displays demographic information the four women at Cheery Faces provided:

**Table 4.7: Cheery Faces adults (4)**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Job title</b>	<b>Qualifications</b>	<b>Started at Cheery Faces</b>
Vanessa	Nursery nurse	➤ Scottish Vocational Qualification (SVQ)	2007
Serena	Nursery nurse	➤ HNC (Childcare and Education) [2008]	2006
Sarah	Nursery nurse	➤ NC ➤ Open Learning Level 3	2007
Rachel	Manager/owner	➤ Qualified general nurse	1991

All five staff members at Sunnyland participated in the interviews. The manager, Jean, and the four nursery practitioners – Jessica, Naomi, Annie and Ivy – were all directly involved in the children's 'physical education'. While I initially considered just interviewing Jean and two of the other practitioners – as I felt it was not necessary for them all to participate – after a few months, I realised that involving all five women would help me gain a better understanding of 'physical education' at Sunnyland. I also realised that since Jessica, Naomi, Annie and Ivy were all equally involved in the children's 'physical education', there was no reason to just include two of them, rather than all four. All five women said they were happy to participate. Table 4.8 shows information they provided about their backgrounds as regards training and qualifications:

**Table 4.8: Sunnyland adults (5)**

Participant	Job title	Qualifications	Started at Sunnyland
Jean	Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Early Childhood Education Diploma (Canada) [1993]</li> <li>➤ Currently doing BA (Childhood Studies)</li> </ul>	1998
Jessica	Nursery nurse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ National Nursery Examination Board [1993]</li> <li>➤ PDA (Childcare and Education) [2006]</li> </ul>	2004
Naomi	Nursery nurse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ HNC (Childcare and Education) [2003]</li> </ul>	2003
Ivy	Nursery nurse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ HNC (Early Years and Childcare) [2007]</li> </ul>	2007
Annie	Nursery nurse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ BSc (Honours) [1983]</li> <li>➤ Registered general nurse [1986]</li> <li>➤ HNC (Childcare and Education) [2005]</li> </ul>	2003

The 14 women's backgrounds, as outlined above, reflect the literature, referred to in Chapter Two, which highlights the diverse range of training and qualifications people working in early childhood care and education may undertake (e.g. Moyles *et al.*, 2002b; Siraj-Blatchford, 1999). With the exception of Sarah and Rachel at Cheery Faces, the adults each participated in three interviews during 2010.

In order to convenience the participants, I told them I was willing to do the interviews wherever and whenever suited them. Apart from Rachel's interview, which took place over the telephone, and Tanya's final interview, which took place in my office (as Tanya suggested this was convenient for her), the interviews took place at the preschools. According to what suited the participants, the interviews were conducted either after work, during participants' planning and preparation time, during their lunch-breaks, or in the case of the participants at Cheery Faces, during time in which Rachel had arranged for other staff to cover their duties. For interviews that took place during work hours, we frequently had a set amount of time (usually about 30 minutes) in which to do them. On some occasions – particularly at Cheery Faces – we had even less time. For instance, Vanessa and Serena asked if their second interview could be done in two 15-minute halves on different days, rather than in one half-hour session. This meant some interviews felt a bit rushed. Other

interviews lasted up to and over an hour (e.g. those with Amanda at Oakdale and Jean at Sunnyland). The average length of the interviews was about 35 minutes.

Most interviews were conducted with one participant. However, Alison and Dawn at Oakdale, and Vanessa and Serena at Cheery Faces were interviewed as pairs. Alison and Dawn requested being interviewed together, as they said they would find this more comfortable than being interviewed individually. Rachel asked if Vanessa and Serena could be interviewed together, as it was more convenient for her. I said I was happy to interview the women in pairs if this suited them best. Table 4.9 summarises the women's roles and the number of interviews they participated in:

**Table 4.9: Adult participants (14)**

Setting	Practitioner(s)	Job title	Interviews
Oakdale	Amanda	Teacher (nursery up to June 2010)	3
Oakdale	Tanya	Physical education teacher	3
Oakdale	Alison & Dawn	Nursery nurse & Learning assistant	3
Oakdale	Stacey	Teacher (nursery from Aug 2010)	3
Cheery Faces	Vanessa & Serena	Nursery nurses	3
Cheery Faces	Sarah	Nursery nurse	1
Cheery Faces	Rachel	Manager/owner	1
Sunnyland	Jean	Manager	3
Sunnyland	Jessica	Nursery nurse	3
Sunnyland	Naomi	Nursery nurse	3
Sunnyland	Ivy	Nursery nurse	3
Sunnyland	Annie	Nursery nurse	3

The first round of interviews began in March 2010, and the final round was completed in December 2010. Rachel's interview took place in January 2011. The rounds of interviews did not begin and end at the same time for all participants. For example, Stacey at Oakdale did her first round interview around the time her colleagues did their second round ones (as she joined the study later).

The interviews were semi-structured, combining features of formal interviews (interview schedule) with features of unstructured, conversational interviews (open-ended questions) (Willig, 2003). Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed. It was particularly important that the first and second round interviews were transcribed immediately, in order to inform subsequent interviews (Atencio, 2006).

For the same reason, field-notes were written after each interview. The interviews were designed around different sections or themes. It was vital to strike a balance between keeping control of the interviews and where they were headed, and allowing the interviewees to re-define the topics being researched and generate new insights (Willig, 2003). Carefully constructed interview schedules were important for this task, as they help “obtain the kind of data which will answer the research question” (Willig, 2003, p. 22).

The first round interview schedules were designed with the intention of gaining general information about the participants’ roles and backgrounds, and about ‘physical education’ at the preschools. Appendix E contains a sample first round interview schedule. Schedules were similar for all participants, and were divided into four sections. I heeded Willig’s (2003) advice that interviews should begin with general questions in order to develop rapport, before moving on to more personal or sensitive questions, envisaging that such ‘warm-up’ questions would help participants to relax and feel comfortable with the interview situation. I felt that this was particularly important for participants’ first interviews. The first section of the interview schedules focused on the participants’ backgrounds, while the second concerned ‘physical education’ at the settings. The third section focused on participants’ experiences of training regarding ‘physical education’, both during initial training and CPD, and the final section focused on their views of ‘physical education’.

Transcribing, reading, re-reading and initial analysis of these interviews led to the planning and construction of the second round interview schedules. These schedules differed slightly for each participant, according, firstly, to which setting they worked at, and secondly, to answers they gave during their first interviews. All schedules, however, contained broadly similar themes and questions. Appendix F features a sample second round interview schedule.

The first section of the second round interview schedules contained ‘warm-up’ questions, such as: have there been any changes to what happens regarding preschool



‘physical education’ since the last interview? The second section followed up on discussions about the term ‘physical education’ during the first interviews, while the third followed up on previous questions concerning the participants’ perspectives on preschool ‘physical education’. The fourth section focused on their roles in ‘physical education’. The fifth section featured questions about specific discourses, which I believed, from my observations and the first round interviews, were prevalent in ‘physical education’ at the settings. Finally, I asked the practitioners about the place of physical activity in their own lives.

As before, transcribing, reading, re-reading and initial analysis of these interviews led to the formulation of the third round interview schedules. Again, schedules differed slightly for each participant, depending on their setting and on their responses in previous interviews, but contained broadly similar questions. Appendix G contains a sample third round interview schedule. These schedules featured five sections. Like in the first interviews, the introductory section concerned participants’ backgrounds. Having read and re-read participants’ previous interview transcripts, I felt it was important to learn more about their reasons for entering their careers, and what their priorities about and within their jobs were. I felt that such information was important for helping me to understand more about their contexts and about why they did and spoke as they did. The second section concerned the curriculum. I followed up on discussions in previous interviews about the changeover to Curriculum for Excellence and asked practitioners about what children experienced in ‘health and wellbeing’ overall (not just regarding ‘physical education’). The third section followed up on previous discussions about participants’ views of ‘physical education’ and specific ‘physical education’ discourses. The fourth section concerned preschool ‘physical education’ CPD. Participants were asked to give advice regarding planning preschool ‘physical education’ CPD or resources. Finally, participants were asked about how they found the experiences of participating in the research. I felt it was important to gain insight into their feelings about the research experience, both for my professional development as a researcher, and to demonstrate to them that the research was not just about me and my study, but about them and their views and experiences.

While interviews were planned and schedules constructed as outlined above, they generally did not follow a linear procedure. This depended on participants' responses and the flow of discussion. In some cases, there was not enough time to discuss particular sections of the schedules, so they carried over into participants' next interviews. However, all participants who were involved in three interviews were asked variations of the questions outlined above. Sarah, who only participated in the first round of interviews, was asked similar questions as in other participants' first interviews. Since Rachel was not directly involved in the children's 'physical education', her interview schedule primarily focused on gleaning contextual information about Cheery Faces.

I noted earlier that some participants' familiarity with the DPEG was likely to have worked favourably regarding gaining access to preschools. However, I worried that this familiarity may have been problematic in that it may have influenced participants' responses. For instance, I worried that they may not have wanted to appear critical or negative regarding 'physical education'. I envisaged that encouraging honesty and assuring them of confidentiality would counteract this. It is also important to note that discourse analysis "allows for multiple and contradictory accounts...and is compatible with the idea that a person's account relates to a *perspective* rather than to their (unified) identity" (Alldred & Burman, 2005, p. 178, emphasis in original). Interviews were not considered to depict participants' 'true voices', but to be influenced by factors such as their "perceptions of the situation, the research focus, interview questions, likely audience and interpretation...structural constraints...and their personal values and biographies" (Alldred & Burman, 2005, p. 181). Following Scheurich (1997), I recognise the "complexity, uniqueness, and indeterminateness" of each interview situation (p. 64). Taylor (2001a) warns that researchers using discourse analysis should not claim to reveal participants' intentions, or underlying meanings or beliefs, as these are "large and dangerous claims...to make" (p. 19). Therefore, like O'Flynn (2004), I avoid making 'truth' claims about the participants' talk, and instead regard their statements and talk as constructions. The interview transcripts were examined as texts (O'Flynn, 2004; Atencio, 2006). I do not view them as single, 'true' accounts of reality, and

acknowledge that they could be interpreted differently by different readers (Tinning, 1991). It is important to note, however, that viewing interviews in this way does not mean I took a *laissez-faire* approach to them. As noted, I encouraged honesty, assured participants of confidentiality, and ensured my interview schedules were carefully constructed.

As well as conducting interviews with adults at each setting, I held interviews with some of the children. Before interviewing the children, I employed another research method with them: group mind-mapping. Before detailing the process of employing these methods, I discuss literature related to generating children's 'talk'.

### *Generating children's talk*

The notion that interviewing children is easy is a misconception (Westcott & Littleton, 2005) and data quality can be an issue (Scott, 2004). I was conscious that potential issues might have arisen with the practicalities of interviewing preschoolers. For instance, there may have been times when they would not want to talk, it may have been difficult to keep them on task, and they may have struggled to verbally express their thoughts and ideas. However, solutions to such issues "deserve consideration, given the potential benefits of collecting data directly from children themselves" (Scott, 2004, p. 100).

Less structured interviews are most appropriate for young children (Scott, 2004). Using resources and stimuli can "engage children's interest, foster thought and reflection, and soften the effects of the high-control, adult-dominant, question-and-answer format" (Brooker, 2001, p. 166). Thus, as well as stimulating and encouraging children, using resources can help address the adult-child power imbalance in the interview situation. Scott (2004) proposes that visual stimuli are useful in interviews with young children, as they make issues "far more concrete than verbal representation alone" (p. 102). She also maintains that visual aids can be helpful if children have vocabulary problems or limited attention spans.

Activities such as sorting cards and drawing are more suitable for young children than a rigid question and answer format, and can help children focus (Mauthner, 1997). Drawing can allow children “to use a graphic expressive technique to elaborate on verbal concepts” (MacDougall *et al.*, 2004, p. 369). MacPhail and Kinchin (2004) cite numerous researchers in proposing the following strengths of drawings as a data collection method:

- It is a fun, attractive activity for children
- It is a quick, efficient way to collect a lot of information as no training or practise (for children) is needed
- Children can freely choose what they want to include without being limited by researchers’ frames of reference
- Children who may be unwilling, unable or too upset to participate in interviews can have the opportunity to express their views
- Children can provide more of their own retrieval cues (i.e. drawing one thing may lead to retrieval of other related aspects they also wish to include).

MacPhail and Kinchin (2004), again citing numerous researchers, propose that possible weaknesses of drawings as a research method are that they only reflect values that can be represented graphically, and they are limited by the skill of the participant.

Other resources researchers have used with young children include picture card sorting activities and teddy bears. For instance, to investigate if young children could distinguish between play and non-play, Howard (2002b) and Howard *et al.* (2006) used an activity called the activity apperception story procedure (AASP). Howard (2002b) explains that the AASP is a two-part procedure that firstly requires children to examine and sort 26 photographic stimuli. The second stage requires the children to re-categorise and justify their choices for a smaller number of photographs. Dahl and Aubrey (2005) used a teddy bear in their investigation of two- to four-year-olds’ views of their nursery provision, and found it “helped children to construct a narrative around their nursery setting” (p. 3). Dahl and Aubrey asked the children to tell the teddy what ‘he’ would like or dislike about nursery, and if there were things ‘he’ should know in order to have a good time there.

As well as using resources and activities during children's interviews, it is necessary to pay attention to other factors in order to strive for high quality data. Scott (2004) and Westcott and Littleton (2005) emphasise the importance of taking care when constructing interview questions. According to Scott (2004), questions should be unambiguous and "pertinent and relevant to the children's own experience or knowledge" (p. 107). Westcott and Littleton (2005) propose that "the style of questioning itself is crucial" (p. 151). They cite Westcott, Davies and Bull (2002) when outlining the following points that should be considered:

- Open-ended questions encourage longer responses; avoid closed-ended questions that require single-word responses
- Children should not be questioned in a leading manner
- Repeating questions in the same form usually results in children changing their responses, as they think their first answer must be wrong
- Resist the temptation to interrupt children, and tolerate long pauses
- Children's language or terminology should not be taken for granted or assumed.

Westcott and Littleton (2005) also advise interviewers to employ good social skills, use humour and try to build trust. I took these points into account when planning for and conducting group mind-mapping and interviews with the children. I now discuss these research methods, beginning with group mind-mapping.

### *Group mind-mapping*

I first learned about group mind-mapping during my initial meeting with Amanda and Alison at Oakdale. The following extract from my field-notes refers to this meeting:

I explained to Amanda that I intended to have interviews/conversations with the children and ask them to draw pictures. She asked if I had noticed the mind-maps on the wall outside the nursery classroom. As I hadn't, she led me outside and explained that an activity they often do with the children is group mind-mapping. This involves placing a large sheet of paper in the centre of a table and gathering the children who want to participate around. A word is written in the centre of the page (an example on the wall was 'café') and the children are asked to think of things associated with that word. As they make suggestions, each individual child is given a pen to draw a picture of their suggestion. Alongside the individual pictures, Amanda or Alison write the words the children have suggested. (Oakdale field-notes, 20-January-2010)

As well as being an activity that the children (at Oakdale) would be familiar with, there were other reasons why I felt that group mind-mapping would be a useful research method to employ. Firstly, it was an inclusive activity; while I intended to ask particular children to participate in interviews, all those who were present and willing to participate in group mind-mapping could do so. Furthermore, as well as being a method of data generation in itself, I envisaged that doing group mind-mapping would give me an idea of which children to ask to participate in follow-up interviews. For instance, if certain children were chatty and keen to participate, they would likely be willing to participate in interviews too. Similarly, if children made particularly compelling comments about ‘physical education’ during mind-mapping, I would know to try to have follow-up interviews with these particular children. Conversely, if children were disinterested or unwilling to participate in group mind-mapping, I would be aware that they may similarly be uninterested in doing interviews. I envisaged that doing group mind-mapping would also provide me with an awareness of any speech or language issues particular children may have had. In this way, group mind-mapping, like participant observation, was a way to help me get to know the children better, as well as help them become more familiar with me.

Before doing group mind-mapping with the children, I felt it was important to observe what it entailed. I asked Amanda if I could observe her doing a group mind-mapping session with the children. She said I was welcome to. The following extract from my field-notes details my observation of Amanda doing a group mind-mapping session about superheroes with the children, whom she had gathered into a circle:

Amanda placed the page on the floor in the centre of the circle and wrote the word ‘superheroes’ in large writing in the centre of it. She asked the children if anyone could tell her anything about superheroes. A number of the children raised their hands into the air. Amanda picked one child at a time to tell her something about superheroes. When the children told her something, she handed them a coloured pen each so that they could draw a picture of what they were talking about. Amanda also wrote down exactly what each child said, beside their pictures, in quotation marks. She asked probing questions to get the children to expand on what they were saying and drawing. (Oakdale field-notes, 5-May-2010)

After the mind-mapping session, Amanda recommended that, rather than doing it with the whole class together, it would be better to do mind-mapping with smaller groups, as this would allow for richer discussion. She also suggested having at least one older child (i.e. who would be going to school after the summer) in each group, in order to stimulate discussion. I intended to divide the children into three groups and do a mind-mapping session with each group on the ninth of June 2010. The first group consisted of five children who would still be at nursery after the summer, along with one child, Ashleigh, who would be moving on to primary school. I had noticed during observations that Ashleigh seemed talkative and enthusiastic. I intended the second group to be similarly structured – five children who would still be at nursery after the summer and one child who would be gone to primary school – and the third and final group to consist of the seven remaining children who would be going to school. However, due to numerous children being absent, the second and third groups each had only four children. The following week, I conducted a fourth mind-mapping session with the children who had been absent. One child, Julia, was absent on both days, so did not participate. This meant that, in total, 18 children at Oakdale participated in group mind-mapping.

The four mind-mapping sessions followed a similar procedure. Amanda asked the children I had selected to sit with me at a table which was surrounded by small chairs. I explained what I wanted to do and introduced the audio-recorder. As mentioned earlier, throughout the research process, children were asked if they were happy to participate in group mind-mapping and interviews. In order that they were fully aware of what data generation involved, every time the audio-recorder was used, I explained what it was and how it worked. I encouraged the children to switch it on and off. I let them speak into it and played back what they said. I also allowed them to listen back to the recordings of the mind-mapping sessions and interviews, which they frequently asked to do. During an interview with Joanna and Beth at Oakdale, they demonstrated that they were aware of why I was using the audio-recorder:

JOANNA: [Re audio-recorder] And does that know what we say all the day?  
 NOLLAIG: It does, and at the very end, I'll stop it and...  
 BETH: So when you leave here, you'll still have our voices?  
 NOLLAIG: Uh-huh, I'll stop it and you'll be able to hear it back at the end.

(Joanna and Beth, Oakdale, interview)

I envisaged that allowing the children to familiarise themselves with the audio-recorder in this manner would ensure they could give *informed* assent. I always asked for their permission to use it (and they always assented). As noted in my field-notes from the first day of mind-mapping, I found that the children generally “seemed interested, but not bothered or overly distracted” by the audio-recorder (Oakdale field-notes, 9-June-2010).

After gaining the children's assent to use the audio-recorder, I wrote ‘gym hall’ in the centre of a large piece of paper we were sitting around. I explained that I wanted the children to tell me, one at a time, about things they did in the gym hall. When they made suggestions, I encouraged them to draw pictures of what they were talking about. I asked follow-on questions to encourage them to elaborate on their suggestions, including: what does that mean? Who goes to the gym hall? What do they do there?

When children ran out of space on the mind-map, I offered them other sheets of paper to draw on. I loosely adapted Christensen and James's (2004) concept of ‘the circle’, which involved giving children individual pages inscribed with a large circle. Christensen and James told the children the circle represented their week, and asked them to divide it up so it illustrated their weekly activities. I gave the children at Oakdale pages on which I had inscribed a large rectangular shape. I asked them to imagine that the rectangle represented the gym hall (which was rectangular shaped) and to draw things they did there. I encouraged them to tell me about their drawings. I also offered them colouring sheets related to ‘physical education’.

Overall, the four mind-mapping sessions went quite well. Some children spoke frequently, while others barely spoke at all. Some children scribbled, while others



were neat and careful with their drawings. Some children left the table after a brief time (I made it clear that it was fine to finish when they wanted to), while others stayed talking and drawing until Amanda called them to do something else. My field-notes indicate that I felt that the third mind-mapping session was the most successful of the three that took place the first day:

...this session was probably the most successful of the three, as the children stayed at the table for quite a long time and all four of them contributed well to the discussion. It should be noted that since all four of the children in this group will move on to primary school after the summer, they are therefore older, and more experienced, than most of the children in the previous two groups. While Jason insisted on drawing and talking about dinosaurs for much of the session, all four children contributed a variety of ideas. Jason and Joshua left the table first, followed later by Nadia, while Beth stayed drawing and chatting to me until Amanda rang the bell to tell the children that it was time to get ready to go home. (Oakdale field-notes, 9-June-2010)

I did not feel that the fourth mind-mapping session, which took place the following week, was as successful:

The children were a bit unfocused and – apart from Janusz – the mind-map only held their attention for a short amount of time. While completing the mind-map, they were inclined not to focus on the topic – the gym hall – and drew and spoke about a lot of random, unrelated notions (for example, apples and balloons). (Oakdale field-notes, 16-June-2010)

I chose to also employ group mind-mapping at Sunnyland and Cheery Faces, as despite the difficulties highlighted in the above extract, I felt that overall it worked well as a research method. As envisaged, as well as being a method of data generation in itself, it was an inclusive activity that helped the children and me get to know each other better. It also helped me decide which children to ask to participate in follow-up interviews. For these reasons, I did mind-mapping with four groups of children at Sunnyland and three groups at Cheery Faces, and followed a similar procedure to what I had done at Oakdale, with some slight alterations. Firstly, the groups were comprised of fewer children (three or four), as I felt that this would both be more manageable for me and give the children a better chance to have their voices heard. A second change was to assign each child a specific space on the mind-map in

which to draw their pictures. I did this because on numerous occasions during mind-mapping at Oakdale, children got upset when others drew on what they felt was their space.

Another change related to the terminology used. While at Oakdale I had asked the children about “the gym hall”, Cheery Faces and Sunnyland did not have gym halls, so I asked about “the garden” or “the play park”, as this was where they did most of their ‘physical education’. I also showed the children at Sunnyland and Cheery Faces photographs of the areas I was talking about in order to stimulate conversation and keep them focused. As at Oakdale, when children ran out of space on the mind-map, I offered them rectangle templates and colouring sheets. Numerous children were absent when I was conducting mind-mapping and so did not get to participate, but 15 children at Sunnyland and nine children at Cheery Faces took part. I again felt that, overall, the mind-mapping sessions went quite well, but, like at Oakdale, some were more successful than others, as the following extracts from my field-notes illustrate:

The first group got on very well with the mind-mapping and all four of them were willing to engage with the activity and with the topic. Along with the mind-map, I showed them some of the laminated photographs that I intended to use in the follow-up conversations. I showed the first group three general photographs of the garden, and when Morgan spoke about playing basketball, I showed him the photo of the basketball net, which he was very interested in and talked a lot about. (Sunnyland field-notes, 25-June-2010)

This second mind-mapping session was much shorter than the previous one (eight and a half minutes versus over 15 minutes), as a group of children arrived into the room and it was too difficult to proceed. By this point, however, Aidan had already left the table and David and Dan were starting to go off-task and get distracted. (Cheery Faces field-notes, 22-July-2010)

Of the 11 mind-mapping sessions in total, the longest lasted over 17 minutes, while the shortest was eight-and-a-half minutes. The average length was about 12 minutes. For the reasons outlined earlier, group mind-mapping was a worthwhile research method to employ with the children. It was a useful framing exercise in that it gave me a general idea of the children’s interpretations of ‘physical education’ at the settings. However, most data generated during mind-mapping related to activities the

children did and equipment they used, so it was not as rich as what was necessary to answer my research questions. Many comments were similar to the following:

I like playing on the climbing bars. (Matthew, Oakdale, mind-mapping)

Running in the play park. (Amber, Cheery Faces, mind-mapping)

Em...I like playing with the balls in the garden. (Oscar, Sunnyland, mind-mapping)

Thus, it was necessary to have interviews in order to follow up on comments made and generate more and richer data.

### *Interviews with children*

After doing group mind-mapping at Oakdale and Sunnyland in June, and knowing that both would be closing in early July for summer holidays, I decided to conduct follow-up interviews with some of the children who would be moving on to primary school. Although aware I would not have the chance to do more interviews with these children after the summer, I felt it was important to follow up on their conversations during mind-mapping. Before the summer, I held interviews with seven children at Oakdale (five of whom would not be returning in August) and six children at Sunnyland (three of whom would not be returning). After the summer, six more children at Oakdale and seven more at Sunnyland also took part in interviews. This meant that, in total, 13 children at Oakdale and 13 children at Sunnyland participated in interviews, along with all 12 child participants at Cheery Faces (which did not close during the summer). Table 4.10 details the total number of children who participated in each of the three research methods:

**Table 4.10: Child participants in observations, group mind-mapping and interviews**

Setting	Observed only	Observed and mind-mapping only	Observed and interviews only	Observed, mind-mapping and interviews	Total
Oakdale	2	5	0	13	20
Cheery Faces	0	0	3	9	12
Sunny-land	20	5	3	10	38
<b>Total</b>	22	10	6	32	<b>70</b>

Table 4.10 shows that 48 children took part in group mind-mapping and/or interviews. All of the children who participated in interviews at Oakdale after the summer had been at the nursery when fieldwork began (i.e. children who started after the summer did not participate). This was because these seven children had participated in the research before the summer and were familiar with me. I similarly intended to only include those children who had been attending Sunnyland from the beginning of the period of fieldwork in interviews after the summer. However, when children I intended to include frequently declined to participate, I asked three children who were new to the nursery if they wanted to participate, and they did. Tommy's, Tristan's and Shona's parents had consented to the children's participation in research. Tables 4.11, 4.12 and 4.13 display information related to the ages and number of mind-mapping sessions and interviews the participating children at each setting took part in:

**Table 4.11: Children at Oakdale who participated in mind-mapping and/or interviews (18)**

<b>Child</b>	<b>Age at start of fieldwork (1-Mar-2010)</b>	<b>Mind-mapping</b>	<b>Interviews</b>
Russell	3 years 6 months	1	1
Ashleigh	4 years 11 months	1	0
Joanna	5 years	1	1
Melanie	4 years 3 months	1	0
Joshua	4 years 11 months	1	0
Jason	4 years 8 months	1	0
Nadia	4 years 7 months	1	1
Beth	4 years 11 months	1	1
Maggie	4 years 4 months	1	2
Matthew	4 years 11 months	1	0
Gavin	3 years 7 months	1	1
Rosie	4 years 8 months	1	5
Sam	3 years 11 months	1	2
Elle	3 years 8 months	1	6
Erin	3 years 11 months	1	5
Colin	3 years 11 months	1	5
Lisa	3 years 8 months	1	2
Janusz	3 years 7 months	1	3

**Table 4.12: Children at Cheery Faces who participated in mind-mapping and/or interviews (12)**

<b>Child</b>	<b>Age at start of fieldwork (1-Apr-2010)</b>	<b>Mind-mapping</b>	<b>Interviews</b>
Amber	3 years 7 months	1	4
Eleanor	3 years 5 months	0	4
Taylor	3 years 11 months	1	4
Kristen	4 years 4 months	0	4
Michelle	3 years 10 months	0	4
Ian	3 years 10 months	1	4
David	3 years 5 months	1	4
Ben	3 years 6 months	1	3
Aidan	3 years 9 months	1	4
Bill	3 years 6 months	1	4
Dan	3 years 7 months	1	5
Chuck	4 years	1	1

**Table 4.13: Children at Sunnyland who participated in mind-mapping and/or interviews (18)**

Child	Age at start of fieldwork (27-April-2010)	Mind-mapping	Interviews
Morgan	3 years 10 months	1	0
Nina	4 years	1	1
Alfie	5 years 3 months	1	1
Kamil	4 years 7 months	1	1
Jackson	4 years 11 months	1	0
Lily	4 years 5 months	1	0
Oscar	3 years 8 months	1	1
Adrianna	3 years 11 months	1	5
Darren	4 years	1	1
Bobby	3 years 1 month	1	0
Harry	3 years 9 months	1	2
Syed	3 years 9 months	1	0
Abbie	3 years 5 months	1	8
Jane	3 years 1 month	1	6
Laurel	3 years 2 months	1	4
Tommy	3 years 3 months	0	3
Tristan	2 years 7 months	0	4
Shona	2 years 10 months	0	3

The children's interviews were informal and, like the mind-mapping sessions, featured visual resources including photographs and pictures to encourage conversation. Questions planned for children's initial interviews were similar to those asked during mind-mapping. They included: what do you do in the gym hall/garden/play park/playground? Who goes there? What do they do? Why do you go there? Follow-up questions in subsequent interviews included: can you do whatever you like? Do the adults teach you things? Do you learn things in the gym hall/garden/play park/playground? What things are you good at? Are there things you are not so good at? Do you ever need help to do things? For children who participated in few interviews, or whose interviews were short, I did not get to ask all of these questions. However, with other children, I asked these and many more questions, including: do you ever do exercise at nursery? What do you do? What does 'exercise' mean? Is it important to do exercise? Do you ever do things at nursery to help you be healthy? What do you do? Is it important to do things to be healthy? Is it important to play?

As the tables above show, the number of interviews children participated in varied. While most of those who left to go to primary school only took part in one interview, those who were present throughout 2010 generally participated in numerous interviews, though this varied. The main reason for this variation related to children's willingness to participate. Duration of interviews also varied. They generally lasted between ten and 20 minutes, but some were shorter and some longer. For instance, one interview with Elle (Oakdale) lasted less than three minutes, as she said she wanted to stop, while one with Ian and Bill (Cheery Faces) lasted almost 25 minutes. The variation in both duration and number of interviews children participated in meant that the quality of data generated varied from child to child. Data quality was also affected by other factors related to individual children. For instance, while Rosie (Oakdale) participated in five interviews, each of which lasted more than ten minutes, she frequently did not answer questions or repeatedly said, "Don't know". I employed numerous strategies in order to avoid such situations and generate high quality data. I envisaged that informal, conversational interviews, featuring various resources and activities, would be most appropriate.

In their initial interviews, I showed the children photographs and pictures of the places they engaged in 'physical education' and of equipment I had seen them using. I sometimes asked children to draw pictures. As I had done during mind-mapping, I asked them to draw on rectangle templates and encouraged them to talk about their drawings. Anning and Ring (2004) write that "making drawings gives young children opportunities to represent intricate personal narratives and use them to communicate with significant others in their lives" (p. 117). Although this statement refers to children's communication with those closest to them, I believed that drawing may also have helped them communicate better with me as a researcher. I felt it may have helped them relax, concentrate and express on paper ideas they may have been unable to express verbally.

I noted earlier that possible weaknesses of using drawings are that they only reflect values that can be represented graphically, and they are limited by participants' skills (MacPhail & Kinchin, 2004). These issues were addressed in my study because

drawings were used in conjunction with interviews. Thus, children were not limited to expressing values that could only be represented graphically, and they had the opportunity to explain their pictures and so resolve the issue of designing what I may have considered to be unclear pictures. Indeed it did not matter if children's pictures were unclear, as I did not intend to analyse them; since my analysis was concerned with the children's talk, drawings were used to encourage conversation (i.e. generate interview data), rather than as a source of data in themselves.

Along with giving children opportunities to draw, I offered them colouring sheets related to 'physical education'. Again, this was to engage their attention and encourage conversation. Another activity – again involving visual resources – I did with the children during their interviews was a picture card sorting activity. I did this towards the end of the period of fieldwork (November and December 2010), as I had noticed when I asked children about play they appeared to find it difficult to explain what it was. I envisaged that showing them a variety of pictures and asking them to choose which ones showed people playing and which ones showed people not playing would help them to elucidate what they understood by 'play'. The picture card sorting activity was loosely based on Howard's (2002b) AASP, which was discussed earlier. Because of my focus on generating and analysing children's talk, this activity, like the drawings and colouring sheets, was used to generate interview data, rather than to be analysed in itself.

A final resource used in the children's interviews was a teddy bear, which I named Patch. This was again a resource used towards the end of the period of fieldwork (November and December 2010), as I wanted to do something different with the children in order to stimulate their interest and ensure they continued to provide rich data. I worried they would get bored of following the same procedure in numerous interviews and felt that using a new resource would alleviate this potential boredom and encourage their participation and talk. Taking a similar approach to Dahl and Aubrey (2005), I told the children that Patch had never been to nursery before and asked them to tell 'him' about, for example, things they did in the gym hall or garden, or if there were any rules there 'he' should know about. I envisaged that, as



well as engaging the children's interest, using Patch may have been helpful regarding the adult-child power imbalance. I hoped it would make the children feel less like they were facing questions from a 'powerful' adult and more like they were telling a 'newcomer' about their 'physical education'. By allowing the children to, for example, hold Patch if they wanted to, I hoped they would feel more in control of and comfortable with the interview situation.

As envisaged, doing interviews allowed me to follow up on comments children made during mind-mapping, and thus generated more and richer data. For instance, I was eager to have an interview with Russell when, during mind-mapping, he mentioned 'exercise'. A follow-up interview gave me the opportunity to encourage him to elaborate on what this meant:

- NOLLAIG: Can you tell me about your space bubble [activity] that you do in the gym hall?
- RUSSELL: Well, we run around and we make sure our bodies are healthy and fit.
- NOLLAIG: Make sure your bodies are healthy and fit? Very good. And what does that mean?
- RUSSELL: That means so that you can get fit.
- NOLLAIG: And what does 'to get fit' mean?
- RUSSELL: So that you get lots of exercise.
- NOLLAIG: So you get lots of exercise – oh cool. And what does that mean? What does 'exercise' mean?
- RUSSELL: Well, I don't know what it means.
- NOLLAIG: Well, can you give me an example of an exercise?
- RUSSELL: Yeah, well, you have to balance yourself.

(Russell, Oakdale, interview)

As interviews were usually conducted individually or in pairs, I could ask the children more questions, and they had better opportunities to answer, as they were not interrupted or distracted in the way they sometimes were during mind-mapping.

During both mind-mapping and interviews, children tended to choose to colour in far more frequently than to draw. Colouring sheets were so popular that on some occasions when I tried using different resources, children wanted to know why I had not offered them the chance to colour in. In this way, colouring sheets had both

advantages and disadvantages. In most cases, they engaged the children's concentration, which meant they were not easily distracted or looking to finish interviews after a brief time. Children were generally willing to chat and answer questions as they coloured. Images on the colouring sheets often stimulated discussion too. For instance, a conversation in which Abbie and Jane told me they enjoyed running in the garden at Sunnyland ensued as they coloured in pictures featuring children running.

There were occasions, however, when colouring in was a distraction for the children. The following interview extract illustrates what I mean by this:

NOLLAIG: Do you ever do things out in the garden to help you be healthy?  
SHONA: Yeah.  
NOLLAIG: Yeah? What sort of things would you do to be healthy?  
*[Silence for approximately three seconds]*  
NOLLAIG: Can you think of anything?  
SHONA: *[Re her colouring sheet]* Look – this looks like a telescope.  
(Shona, Sunnyland, interview)

There were occasions when other resources used, such as the photographs, similarly distracted children from answering questions, but in general, these resources were useful in engaging children's attention and encouraging their talk.

Drawing was an activity that, despite the literature advocating its use in research with children, did not always work well. There were occasions when it was useful, as sometimes children eagerly drew and talked about pictures related to 'physical education':

This is the slide where someone climbs in the gym hall. (Nadia, Oakdale, mind-mapping)

I drew balls. (Oscar, Sunnyland, mind-mapping)

However, children often chose to draw pictures that were completely unrelated to what I asked them about:

I am drawing a fairy godmother. (Taylor, Cheery Faces, mind-mapping)

Look! Look at the dinosaur. (Jason, Oakdale, mind-mapping)

Thus, I found that drawing was an activity that sometimes engaged the children's imaginations in ways that were not helpful regarding generating data concerned with 'physical education'. As the colouring sheets and photographs were perhaps less abstract, the children tended not to engage with these resources in such imaginative ways, and therefore usually stayed more focused on what I was asking them about.

This was also the case with the picture card sorting activity, which I felt worked well. It allowed the children to elucidate what they considered to be play and non-play, something many of them struggled to do in previous interviews. The following excerpt provides an example of how the picture cards helped the children overcome this difficulty:

- NOLLAIG: Is there another picture where somebody is playing?  
AMBER: *[Picking up the picture of a boy sitting at a desk]* That's not one.  
NOLLAIG: You've picked one up and you're saying he's not playing, is it?  
*[Amber nods]*  
NOLLAIG: What's he doing?  
AMBER: He's not playing.  
NOLLAIG: All right. What do you think he might be doing instead?  
AMBER: Em...he's sitting down at his desk.  
NOLLAIG: Sitting down at his desk – so he's not playing?  
AMBER: Yeah.

(Amber, Cheery Faces, interview)

The final resource used with the children was the teddy bear. While talking to Patch engaged the children's imaginations, they tended to stay focused on questions 'he' asked, rather than constructing imaginative stories. I was glad I introduced Patch when I did as 'he' added a certain novelty to the interviews and reinvigorated the children's interest. Patch was popular and the children were eager to answer 'his' questions, and thus provide data. The following excerpt shows how Ben and Dan keenly told Patch about the garden:

BEN: Um...um...Patch?  
 NOLLAIG: *[Facing Patch to Ben]* Yes?  
 BEN: Um...um...we...we run about in the garden.  
 NOLLAIG: *[Moving Patch as if 'he' is running around]* Like this?  
 BEN: Yeah!  
 NOLLAIG: Running about – oh right. So is it important to run about out there, do you think?  
 DAN: Yeah, and we've got another garden.  
 BEN: It's not...it's not a running race – it's...it's just run around, run around and run, run, run!  
 NOLLAIG: Okay, and why do you do that?  
 BEN: 'Cause we...we...we just go...um...we play around running.  
 NOLLAIG: Okay. So it's good fun, is it?  
 BEN: Yeah, we...  
 DAN: Um...Patch?  
 BEN: We go on the...  
 DAN: *[To Patch]* Can I tell you something?  
 NOLLAIG: *[Facing Patch to Dan]* Yes.  
 DAN: We have another garden and there's trikes in another garden.  
 (Ben and Dan, Cheery Faces, interview)

Resources used during mind-mapping and interviews were generally successful in engaging children's interest and encouraging conversation. Elements of the approach taken, and methods and resources employed, may be transferable to other contexts, since many guidelines in the literature concerning interviewing young children also apply when interviewing older children and adults.

### *Similarities and differences between generating children's and adults' talk*

Hill (2005) asserts that "in many ways the similarities between children and adults are greater than the differences" (p. 64). He outlines the following similarities between the two groups:

- Adults can feel as incompetent and powerless as children can
- Like adults, children are the best informed people about their own lives
- There is little difference between adults and children regarding memory and recall
- Many children can verbalise as well as adults
- Children and adults have similar rights regarding participant information
- Both children and adults will be more likely to participate if they feel respected and interested.

Scott (2004) aligns with Hill (2005), noting that “it is important...not to overemphasize data quality issues with respect to children. Data quality is *always* an issue, regardless of the age of the respondent” (p. 116, emphasis in original).

Hill (2005), however, cautions that some differences between children and adults do need to be recognised. He proposes three main bases for differentiating between children and adults: ability, power and vulnerability. I believe the approach I took to the children’s interviews was appropriate for preschool children. I was careful that the way I spoke with children, and the language and rapport I employed, were tailored to cater to their individual abilities, to empower them and to in no way take advantage of any potential vulnerability (e.g. by attempting to persuade, influence or harm them). I was aware that the interview context, in which their views were paramount, may have been a strange situation for them. However, by seeking their assent, explaining the procedures to them carefully and honestly, and informing them of how valuable their participation was, I hoped to go some way towards addressing the adult-child power imbalance. For the same reason, I also sometimes interviewed children in pairs or groups of three if they wanted, like I had done with some of the adults. As in group mind-mapping, I always sought the children’s assent regarding using the audio-recorder and ensured they were aware they could finish interviews whenever they wanted to.

While I have mentioned the adult-child power imbalance on numerous occasions, I am wary of portraying it in simplistic, linear terms. While I was in a powerful position as the researcher – for instance, I recruited particular participants, devised and asked particular questions, chose to employ particular resources – it was not the case that the participants (both adults and children) had no power. In Foucaultian terms, power was fluid; it was not something I alone possessed (Foucault, 1991b). Following Scheurich (1997), I believe that “interviewees are not passive subjects; they are active participants in the interaction” (p. 71). In this way, each interview is co-constructed by the interviewer and interviewee(s) in that particular moment. Both adults and children regularly demonstrated that they were as in control of the interview situations as I was, if not even more so. For instance, on numerous

occasions, I had arranged to interview adult participants (Serena, Vanessa, Alison and Dawn in particular), only to show up and discover that the arranged time no longer suited them. Children often declined to participate in interviews. Interviews with both adults and children often ended earlier than I hoped because participants needed or wanted to do something else. Participants also exercised power (Foucault, 1991b) and resistance in the ways they responded (or did not respond) to questions. The following excerpt provides an example of what I mean by this:

NOLLAIG: Yeah? Does that help you stay healthy?  
[*Ian starts playing with the pencils – piling them on top of each other etc.*]  
IAN: Look!  
[*Ian and Bill laugh*]  
NOLLAIG: Ian, can you...  
IAN: [*Re the pencils*] Watch!  
NOLLAIG: Can you think of things that you do out in the playground...or  
out in the garden to help you stay healthy?  
IAN: [*Re the pencils*] Bill, do it again.  
(Ian and Bill, Cheery Faces, interview)

It is clear that adult-child power relations are not a simple, linear construct in which the adult is powerful and the child powerless. This is also the case regarding the researcher-participant relationship generally; to say that the researcher has all the power and the participant has none ignores the complexity of the interview situation. This links to my earlier point about each interview being co-constructed by the researcher and participant(s) in the particular moment it takes place. This in turn links to my contention that I should avoid making ‘truth’ claims about participants’ talk (O’Flynn, 2004). Like the adults’ interviews, the children’s interviews (and mind-mapping sessions) were recorded, transcribed immediately afterwards, and the transcripts were examined as texts (Atencio, 2006; O’Flynn, 2004).

Before explaining how I analysed the data, I briefly discuss some strategies I employed to ensure high research quality.

### **4.3 Research quality**

There are three criteria by which academic research has conventionally been evaluated: reliability, validity and replicability (Taylor, 2001b). *Reliability* refers to

“the extent to which a test or procedure produces similar results under constant conditions on all occasions” (Bell, 2000, p. 103). According to Willig (2003), qualitative researchers are not as concerned with reliability as quantitative researchers, because qualitative research investigates individual, possibly unique, phenomena and experiences in great detail. The *validity* of a research instrument refers to the degree to which it assesses what it set out to measure (Fink, 1995). Patton (2002) explains that in qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument, so the validity of the research depends greatly on his or her skill, competence and diligence. Willig (2003) believes there are three ways qualitative research inherently addresses issues of validity:

- Participants can challenge or correct assumptions the researcher may have
- Data collection generally takes place in real-life settings
- The research process and the researcher’s role are constantly under review.

Taylor (2001b) explains that the third criterion, *replicability*, involves both reliability and validity, as it evaluates whether another researcher could replicate the study and produce similar results. Willig’s (2003) point about qualitative researchers not being as concerned with reliability as quantitative researchers, due to the individual nature of phenomena and experiences investigated, is also relevant to replicability.

The aforementioned criteria refer to a particular set of assumptions which belong to the positivist and postpositivist tradition (Taylor, 2001b). For researchers following this approach, “good research is assumed to...reveal enduring features and predictable causal relationships” (Taylor, 2001b, p. 319). This thesis does not make such claims. It is underpinned by a different epistemological viewpoint in that it is not aiming to capture the ‘truth’ of reality, but to present an interpretation which is inevitably partial (Taylor, 2001a). Poststructural theory refutes the idea that universal structures underlie all meanings and subjectivities (Atencio, 2006); its emphasis on context means generalisations are neither desirable nor possible. Thus, the evaluation criteria of reliability, validity and replicability are challenged (Taylor, 2001b).

However, I employed a number of strategies in order to ensure quality research. For instance, as noted earlier, the study featured methodological triangulation because of the use of observations and interviews. There was also data triangulation in that data

were collected from various sources – practitioners, children and myself (field-notes).

Another strategy relates to interrogating how my own intentions and subjectivities affected data generation and analysis. This involves explicit acknowledgement and awareness of the “conscious and unconscious baggage” (Scheurich, 1997, p. 73) that influences both research interactions and interpretation of data. Taylor (2001a) emphasises the importance of reflexivity and self-awareness, proposing that the researcher must adopt “a policy of openness...[by] including some self-description and accounts of her...own relation to the topic, participants and data” (p. 19). Similarly, Malterud (2001) declares that throughout the research process, “the effect of the researcher should be assessed, and, later on, shared” (p. 484). Bias, while not eliminated, is thus accounted for (Malterud, 2001). I frequently engaged in reflexivity throughout the period of fieldwork through my field-notes. Since I wrote field-notes after every element of fieldwork – initial meetings, observations, interviews – my field-notes became a sort of diary in which I also recorded my feelings and thoughts. I wrote such incidences of reflexivity in square brackets, so I was aware of where and how my own views and experiences may have been affecting what I was writing about. Another way I strived to engage in reflexivity and openness is through the provision of my brief ‘autobiography’ in Chapter One.

Regarding high quality qualitative research, Mays and Pope (1995) recommend providing clear, detailed descriptions of all elements of the study, including the theoretical framework, assumptions, sampling strategy, contexts, methods and data analysis procedures. They assert that “as in quantitative research, the basic strategy to ensure rigour in qualitative research is systematic and self conscious research design, data collection, interpretation, and communication” (p. 110). I have therefore tried, at all stages of writing this thesis, to provide honest, detailed accounts of what the study involved. So far in this chapter, I have done this regarding data generation. I now do the same regarding data analysis.



#### **4.4 Data analysis**

Interviews and mind-mapping sessions were transcribed using Microsoft Word and examined as texts, as were the field-notes. As explained in Chapter Three, my analysis was based on the work of Foucault. I investigated the discourses of preschool physical education which had currency at the three preschools, in order to examine the potential effects of their ‘work’ on practitioners and children. Drawing on Foucault’s work around techniques of power (1982; 1991e; 1998) – particularly through reference to Gore’s (1995) framework – and technologies of the self (1992; 2000c), I interrogated the ways in which practitioners and children engaged with the discourses in order to constitute their subjectivities.

As noted earlier, following Wright (2004b), I used a poststructural discourse analysis approach concerned with identifying patterns in language use. This involved interrogating the ways discourses and power relations circulated throughout the texts (Burrows, 2010b). I followed the two steps proposed by Wright (2004b), which were presented earlier, and guidelines proposed by Carabine (2001) and MacLure (2003). Carabine’s (2001) guide to doing Foucauldian discourse analysis includes the following steps:

- Know the data (read and re-read)
- Identify themes, categories and objects of the discourses
- Look for evidence of inter-relationships between discourses
- Identify discursive strategies and techniques employed
- Look for absences and silences
- Look for resistances and counter-discourses
- Identify effects of the discourses.

Following the guidelines of Carabine (2001) and MacLure (2003), and adapting the work of Wright (2004b) and O’Flynn (2004), I devised two sets of analytical questions to interrogate the data in order to answer my research questions. The first set of questions was designed to help me identify dominant discourses in both the curricular documents, Early Moves literature and the other texts (i.e. transcripts and field-notes). The questions I asked were: what discourses related to preschool

physical education are circulating? What ‘truths’ and meanings about preschool physical education are constructed and privileged? How are knowledge claims established and defended? How does the text persuade? Where does power reside in the text? Whose voices are privileged and whose are silenced? What oppositions and binaries structure the arguments in the text? Where are the gaps, silences and inconsistencies?

Subsequent reading and re-reading of the texts were required to thoroughly interrogate the workings of the discourses. The second set of analytical questions was designed to allow me to interrogate this ‘work’, and in particular with regard to the transcripts, the ways in which the practitioners and children engaged with the discourses in order to constitute their subjectivities. A question I asked of all the texts was: how do the discourses shift, compete and emerge throughout the texts? Questions I asked regarding the transcripts were: in what ways do the practitioners and children ‘know’ themselves in relation to dominant physical education discourses? What ‘ethical’ beings do they work towards becoming? How do they govern themselves in relation to physical education discourses? How do they work to maintain particular subject-positions in relation to these discourses? What are the potential consequences regarding their practices and subjectivities?

Before interrogating the interview texts with regard to the two sets of analytical questions, I coded them according to major themes. I grouped the adult interviews together in three documents, one for each preschool. I then, within each of the three documents, coded the data under the following seven themes: Background/Qualifications/Reasons for becoming a preschool practitioner; Curriculum; Physical education/physical activity in own lives; Term ‘physical education’; Physical education in initial training/CPD; ‘Physical education’ at the nursery; Experiences of being a research participant. The questions asked in the interviews, and thus the ensuing discussions, revolved around these themes. I coded the interviews in this way in order to manage the large volume of data I had to analyse; this allowed me to focus on a particular theme at a time.

I followed a similar coding procedure with the children's mind-mapping and interview data; I grouped the Oakdale mind-mapping data into one document, the Cheery Faces data into a second document, and the Sunnyland data into a third, and did the same with the children's interview data. I then coded the data according to themes, as I had done with the adult data. I coded the mind-mapping data under the following four themes: Where do you do 'physical education'?; What do you do in 'physical education'?; Who does what?; Why do you do 'physical education'? I coded the interview data under the same themes, along with one additional theme, which concerned the data relating to the picture card sorting activity. I entitled this category, 'What is play?'

Having coded the data in this way, I read and re-read it in order to answer the two sets of analytical questions. The next three chapters present the results of this analysis. Chapter Five concerns both my analysis of the curricular documentation and Early Moves literature, and data from participants at all three settings. Chapter Six focuses on their engagements with developmental discourses and Chapter Seven concerns discourses related to physical activity and health.



## **Chapter 5 – Discourses of ‘physical education’ at Oakdale, Cheery Faces and Sunnyland**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents an overview of the discursive ‘truths’ underpinning ‘physical education’ at Oakdale, Cheery Faces and Sunnyland. Following Wright (2004b), I begin by examining potential sources of preschool ‘physical education’ discourses available to the participants; I analyse the physical education sections of the curricular guidelines used at the settings, and documentation related to preschool physical education CPD some of the practitioners had participated in.

I then provide a description of ‘physical education’ at each setting through reference to the participants’ talk and my observations. Underpinning my analysis of the participants’ talk with key observations reflects the ways discourses operate in actions, practices and environments (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007). Since discourses “systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1974, p. 49), I wanted to investigate discourses as they constituted practices and subjects, thus providing windows into preschool ‘physical education’ in a rich sense. This meant paying attention to the work done by discourses in practitioners’ and children’s practices, as well as in their speech. In Chapters Six and Seven, I provide a more in-depth analysis of the ways in which the participants engaged with particular ‘truths’ in order to construct their subjectivities.

### **5.2 Potential sources of ‘physical education’ discourses**

#### **5.2.1 Introduction**

Identifying the meanings of ‘physical education’ available to the participants is an important first step towards recognising and naming the discourses they drew on (Wright, 2004b). I first explore a source of physical education discourses I envisaged all the practitioners were likely to have engaged with – the physical education sections of Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence (LTS, 2009a). Since the practitioners at all three settings told me they used Curriculum for Excellence in their

planning and practice, it seemed likely to have been a source of ‘physical education’ discourses for the participants.

### **5.2.2 Source 1: Curriculum for Excellence**

Following a national debate on the purposes of education in Scotland (see Munn *et al.*, 2004), Curriculum for Excellence was launched with the publication of ‘A Curriculum for Excellence: The Curriculum Review Group’ (Scottish Executive, 2004). This brief document introduces Curriculum for Excellence’s key features (i.e. values, purposes, principles) and rationalises the implementation of this single curriculum for three- to 18-year-olds on the basis that Scotland needs to “increase the economic performance of the nation; reflect its growing diversity; improve health; and reduce poverty” (p. 10). The purposes of the curriculum are to enable children and young people to become “successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors to society and at work” (p. 12). These sentences carry “the stamp of neoliberalism” (Macdonald, 2011, p. 36), particularly through the references to increasing economic performance and health levels, and the concern with enabling students to become responsible citizens and effective contributors to society and the world of work. The reference to health is particularly relevant to my analysis, as physical education is housed within the Curriculum for Excellence subject area of health and wellbeing.

The completed Curriculum for Excellence was published in 2009. At preschools, it replaced ‘A Curriculum Framework for Children 3-5’ (LTS, 2004). The introduction to Curriculum for Excellence (LTS, 2009a) expresses a commitment to providing students with “a broad general education” (p. 3). It claims to be “less detailed and prescriptive than previous curriculum advice” in order to provide practitioners with “professional space...to meet the varied needs of all children and young people” (p. 3).

Curriculum for Excellence (LTS, 2009a) consists of eight curriculum areas: expressive arts; health and wellbeing; languages; mathematics; religious and moral education; sciences; social studies; and technologies. Each area has two main guiding

documents; one related to ‘principles and practice’ (which outlines, for example, the guiding framework, purposes of learning, practitioners’ roles and responsibilities, and features of assessment) and a second concerning ‘experiences and outcomes’ (which details specific learning experiences and outcomes children are expected to encounter and achieve). Health and wellbeing consists of six strands (LTS, 2009b):

- Mental, emotional, social and physical wellbeing
- Planning for choices and changes
- Physical education, physical activity and sport
- Food and health
- Substance misuse
- Relationships, sexual health and parenthood.

My analysis thus focuses on the health and wellbeing ‘principles and practice’ document (LTS, 2009b) and the physical education, physical activity and sport sections of health and wellbeing ‘experiences and outcomes’ (LTS, 2009c). I begin by examining the ‘principles and practice’ text.

#### *Health and wellbeing ‘principles and practice’*

A small section of the seven-page health and wellbeing ‘principles and practice’ document is specifically concerned with physical education, physical activity and sport. In this section, physical education is constructed as a means to prepare children for “active”, “healthy”, “fulfilling” lives:

Regular physical activity is essential for good health. Physical education should inspire and challenge children and young people to experience the joy of movement, to develop positive attitudes both individually and as part of a group and to enhance their quality of life through active living. This will give children and young people an important foundation for participation in experiences in physical activities and sport and in preparation for a healthy and fulfilling lifestyle. (LTS, 2009b, p. 6)

This extract features a strong, declarative tone, stressing the ‘necessity’ of physical activity. Commitment to leading a ‘healthy’ lifestyle is an element of the subject position privileged: ‘good’ children make this commitment in order to enhance their “quality of life”. Practitioners are expected to provide children with experiences that will enable them to become particular types of citizens; the reference to enhancing

quality of life through active living reflects the neoliberal “rational, self-managing citizen” (Macdonald, 2011, p. 38). It is notable that “joy” and “positive attitudes” are positioned as the “foundation” for future participation in physically active, healthy lifestyles, while there is no mention of motor skills and movement concepts.

Previous research indicates that physical education curricula are often centred on a motor skill development discourse (e.g. Thorpe, 2003; Wright, 1997), so its absence is perhaps surprising. Motor skills and movement concepts are referred to, however, in the health and wellbeing ‘experiences and outcomes’ document, which is discussed below.

The final sentence of the section of the ‘principles and practice’ text related to physical education again features a concern with physical activity in children’s future lives:

Taken together, the experiences and outcomes in physical education, physical activity and sport aim to establish the pattern of daily physical activity which, research has shown, is most likely to lead to sustained physical activity in adult life. (LTS, 2009b, p. 6)

Again, the tone is authoritative and certain; physical activity is important in adult life. It is assumed that the reader ‘knows’ why this is, as no explanations are given about why it is ‘good’. The reference to “research” strengthens the case that physical activity is ‘imperative’, by seemingly providing ‘proof’ and legitimacy to the claims made. As the research is not referenced, practitioners are not encouraged to critically engage with the claims; they are expected to accept what the documentation says as ‘truth’. In this way, their agency is denied; practitioners are reduced to technicians, whereby policy is done to, rather than with, them (Alexander, 2008; Lingard, Hayes & Mills, 2003). Their role is simply to deliver the messages that children are expected to act on (Gard, 2008). Concomitantly, there is an absence of a more sociocultural or critical view of physical education, physical activity and health.

Following Rossi *et al.* (2009), I recognise that curricular documentation may be expected to provide direct, ‘certain’ guidance. Like these authors, however, the inconsistencies and contradictions regarding the curriculum’s claims concern me. For



instance, the absence of sociocultural views in the health and wellbeing documentation appears to be inconsistent with the curriculum's focus on helping pupils "to understand diverse cultures and beliefs", enabling them to build "a strong foundation of knowledge and understanding", and promoting "a commitment to considered judgement and ethical action" (Scottish Executive, 2004, p.11). The privileging of a simplistic, uncritical view of health and its allegedly direct relationship with physical activity similarly does not align with the curriculum's stated commitments to promoting "independent thinking" (LTS, 2009b, p. 4) and "critical thinking" (Scottish Executive, 2006, p. 10).

Critical thinking can be defined in different ways. One interpretation is that it involves higher-order thinking (Culpan & Bruce, 2007) and scepticism, "learning to know when to question something, and what sorts of questions to ask" (McPeck, 1981, p. 7). Another interpretation relates to critical inquiry, which aims to assist students to question and challenge dominant discourses and power relations that may lead to inequalities (Wright, 2004a). Whichever way critical thinking is interpreted, there are inconsistencies in relation to it throughout Curriculum for Excellence. For instance, while the 'principles and practice' text seemingly legitimises its claims about physical activity by referring to "research", it is silent about literature that may encourage practitioners and students to think more critically. The "research" referred to obviously does not include that which engages with notions of physical activity and health in a more critical way (e.g. Evans, 2003; Gard & Wright, 2005; Johns, 2005).

The 'principles and practice' document, in its short section concerning physical education, primarily draws on physical activity and health discourses. The physical education section of the 'experiences and outcomes' text is more detailed and draws on other discourses, including motor skill development.

### *Health and wellbeing 'experiences and outcomes'*

The experiences and outcomes for the physical education, physical activity and sport strand of health and wellbeing are divided into three categories: physical education;

physical activity and sport; and physical activity and health. Illustrating the influence of developmental discourses, the experiences and outcomes are presented across five levels, which are described as “lines of development which describe progress in learning” (LTS, 2009a, p. 4). The first level – ‘early’ – concerns children in preschool and the initial year of primary school, “or later for some” (LTS, 2009a, p. 4). At this level, there are four experiences and outcomes in the physical education category, one related to physical activity and sport, and two concerning physical activity and health. It is notable that the curriculum refers to physical education at the early level, as the previous preschool curriculum (LTS, 2004) does not refer to physical education, but to ‘physical development and movement’. Developmental discourses prevail in the ‘physical development and movement’ section of LTS (2004). They are evident in, for example, its mentions of play and exploration, and its references to what happens to “young children” as they “develop”, “grow” and “change” (p. 36). My analysis examines if the change from ‘physical development’ to ‘physical education’ has meant that different discourses now underpin documentation related to this preschool curriculum area. I first look at the experiences and outcomes specifically categorised under ‘physical education’.

Numerous discourses are circulating in the introduction to the physical education experiences and outcomes. Similar to the ‘principles and practice’ document, discourses related to health and physical activity are evident. For instance, the document states that children should be active during physical education in order to “improve aspects of fitness” (LTS, 2009c, p. 5). This indicates that the focus on physical activity and health discourses leads to physical education lessons being positioned as sites for working on children’s bodies (Evans, 2003; Johns, 2005).

The introduction to the physical education experiences and outcomes also features a related concern with motor skill development, which is positioned as the ‘key’ to lifelong physical activity:

Physical education provides learners with a platform from which they can build physical competences, improve aspects of fitness, and develop personal and interpersonal skills and attributes. It enables learners to develop the

concepts and skills necessary for participation in a wide range of physical activity, sport, dance and outdoor learning, and enhances their physical wellbeing in preparation for leading a fulfilling, active and healthy lifestyle. (LTS, 2009c, p. 5)

The strong verbs (“provides”, “enables”, “enhances”) position the development of motor skills in order to lead an active, healthy life as the goal of physical education. It seems likely that the reference to “concepts” refers to movement concepts (although it may refer to ‘understanding’ of issues related to physical education, physical activity and health more widely). The focus on preparing children for a “healthy lifestyle” includes a concern with their current physical wellbeing, a concept again positioned as significant for their future lives. In the appendix of the ‘experiences and outcomes’ document, physical wellbeing is defined as “the knowledge, skills and attributes that we need to understand how physical factors affect our health” (LTS, 2009c, p. 19). This definition moves beyond a biomedical interpretation of physical wellbeing; instead, it focuses on ‘understanding’. Positioning the understanding of factors that affect health as a necessary foundation for leading a healthy lifestyle again reflects the neoliberal concern with producing rational, responsible citizens (Macdonald, 2011); the implication of the above excerpt appears to be that children will be able to lead healthy lives once they have particular ‘understanding’ and skills.

Of the four early level experiences and outcomes in the physical education category, three are concerned with movement skills and concepts. They are:

I am learning to move my body well, exploring how to manage and control it and finding out how to use and share space. (LTS, 2009c, p. 5)

I am developing my movement skills through practice and energetic play. (LTS, 2009c, p. 5)

By exploring and observing movement, I can describe what I have learned about it. (LTS, 2009c, p. 6)

The word “energetic” in the second statement connects the motor skill discourse to a concern with physical activity. However, the emphasis on observing and talking

about movement in the third statement implies that physical education should not be purely 'practical'. The focus on "observing" means children are required to engage in surveillance and monitoring. Observing is also likely to involve classification (Gore, 1995), as children compare their own abilities with those of their peers (Burrows & Wright, 2001). The reference in the first statement to providing children with opportunities to explore how to "manage and control" their bodies again positions physical education lessons as sites for bodywork (Brace-Govan, 2002). While the focus on exploration perhaps indicates that children should engage in disciplinary bodily practices themselves, this work will take place under the surveillance, regulation and monitoring of adults.

The references in the above statements to "exploring", "finding out" and "play" place emphasis on active learning. As noted in Chapter Two, Piaget's model of cognitive development foregrounds this concept. The above statements therefore illustrate the influence of developmental discourses on the curriculum. The statements focus strongly on individual development and learning. Indeed, this could be said of all the experiences and outcomes in the curriculum, since they are written in the first person. This strategy reflects the neoliberal focus on the individual, and explicitly links to the notion of subjectivity by directly indicating the subject position the curriculum writers desire children to take up. Following Priestley and Humes (2010), I argue that, while writing in this way is intended to place the learner at the centre of the curriculum, there is a certain degree of artificiality in the strategy, because of the use of language the intended learners are unlikely to use. For instance, while wary of proceeding on the basis of developmental assumptions regarding what they 'should' be able to do, I find it difficult to imagine young children talking about "developing...movement skills" or "observing movement", because it seems unlikely that practitioners would use such terms with them. In this way, writing the experiences and outcomes in the first person seems to be "an artifice devised by the planners rather than a true reflection of the learning process" (Priestley & Humes, 2010, p. 353). As such, adults' voices appear to take precedence over children's voices.

The fourth early level physical education experience and outcome again focuses on children's individual development and learning, but also concerns their relationships with other people:

I am aware of my own and others' needs and feelings, especially when taking turns and sharing resources. I recognise the need to follow rules. (LTS, 2009c, p. 6)

It is perhaps surprising that this statement is specifically categorised under 'physical education', as it could likely have been placed anywhere in the curriculum. While sharing is regularly promoted in the early level experiences and outcomes throughout the curriculum (e.g. in languages, mathematics, and religious and moral education), it is usually cited in relation to sharing ideas and experiences, rather than resources. The only other explicit reference to turn-taking is in an experience and outcome of 'listening and talking' in the languages area, while "the need to follow rules" is not mentioned anywhere else. The emphasis on taking turns and following rules indicates that while preschool physical education should encourage exploration and freedom, there should also be some restrictions and structure; it should involve both 'structure and freedom'. The emphasis on following rules is again indicative of a commitment to neoliberalism, since following rules is "imperative to being a good citizen and contributing to the good of society" (Macdonald *et al.*, 2010, p. 125).

The second category of experiences and outcomes in the physical education, physical activity and sport strand of health and wellbeing concerns physical activity and sport. The curriculum states that these experiences and outcomes "are intended to establish a pattern of daily physical activity which, research has shown, is most likely to lead to sustained physical activity in adult life" (LTS, 2009c, p. 7). This sentence is virtually identical to the statement, presented above (see p. 134), which concludes the section related to physical education in the 'principles and practice' document. Its repeated use illustrates the prevailing physical activity discourse. As before, the mention of (non-referenced) "research" seemingly 'proves' that physical activity is 'imperative'. The early level experience and outcome for this category is:

I am enjoying daily opportunities to participate in different kinds of energetic play, both outdoors and indoors. (LTS, 2009c, p. 7)

Discourses related to physical activity and play come together in the notion of “energetic play”. This indicates that, while the curriculum emphasises the notion of physical activity for health, it positions play – rather than more adult-led activities – as an appropriate means of increasing children’s physical activity levels. Related to this, enjoyment is again positioned as an important factor in achieving this category’s aim of establishing a pattern for lifelong physical activity. This is also an aim of the third category of experiences and outcomes in the physical education, physical activity and sport strand of health and wellbeing. The sentence concerning sustained physical activity in adulthood features yet again in this category. The introduction to this section, which focuses on physical activity and health, states:

Learners develop an understanding of their physical health and the contribution made by participation in physical education, physical activity and sport to keeping them healthy and preparing them for life beyond school. They investigate the relationship between diet and physical activity and their role in the prevention of obesity. (LTS, 2009c, p. 9)

Relationships between physical activity, diet and health are constructed as certain and obvious; children need to be concerned with diets and physical activity in order to prevent obesity. As before, these claims are presented as ‘truths’. Similarly, physical education is unquestioningly positioned as significant in terms of “keeping” children “healthy”. This point supports the work of Cale and Harris (in press) and Gard (2004b), which suggests that physical education contexts are increasingly positioned as important sites for promoting healthy lifestyles. The first of the two early level experiences and outcomes for this category again draws on taken-for-granted notions about health and physical activity:

I know that being active is a healthy way to be. (LTS, 2009c, p. 9)

The second experience and outcome centres on how physical activity makes children feel:

I can describe how I feel after taking part in energetic activities and I am becoming aware of some of the changes that take place in my body. (LTS, 2009c, p. 9)

It is not clear if “changes that take place” refers to changes in the body related to physical activity, or changes associated more generally with growing up. Since the first part of the sentence is concerned with the effects of physical activity, it seems that this may be the case with the latter part too. If so, this would imply that practitioners are expected to encourage children to think of physical activity as a means of working on their bodies, presumably in order to ‘keep healthy’ and ‘prevent obesity’, notions mentioned in the introduction to this statement. The strategy of writing in the first person again has the effect of explicitly illustrating the curriculum writers’ intention that children should internalise these notions and construct their subjectivities in accordance with the discourses the curriculum privileges.

My analysis indicates that discourses related to physical activity and health are prevalent throughout the Curriculum for Excellence documentation related to physical education. This documentation appears to have been strongly influenced by neoliberal discourses concerned with improving health and wellbeing (Horrell, Sproule & Gray, 2012). Developmental discourses are also prevalent, including those related to motor skill development and play. Since Oakdale, Cheery Faces and Sunnyland all used Curriculum for Excellence in their planning and practice, it seemed likely that it would have been a source of ‘physical education’ discourses for the participants. I now turn to what I considered to be a second potential source of ‘physical education’ discourses – documentation associated with Early Moves CPD.

### **5.2.3 Source 2: Early Moves CPD**

Early Moves is “a developmentally appropriate movement framework for young children” (Jess & McIntyre, 2009, p. 16). It was constructed and is disseminated through CPD courses by the Developmental Physical Education Group (DPEG) at the University of Edinburgh. Since 2001, the DPEG has been engaged in a national CPD programme concerning physical education for children aged three to 14 years

(Atencio, Jess & Dewar, 2012). The DPEG's original focus was on the development and dissemination of Basic Moves (Jess, Dewar & Fraser, 2004), a physical education programme for five- to seven-year-olds. Early Moves evolved from Basic Moves when the DPEG extended its focus to include physical education for preschool children.

I was aware before fieldwork began that some of the participating practitioners had engaged in Early Moves CPD. In their initial interviews, I asked the practitioners about their experiences of preschool physical education CPD. Amanda and Tanya at Oakdale had participated in a three-part Early Moves course (a day and two evenings) and were members of a group which was constructing a preschool physical education resource pack. The other practitioners at Oakdale had little or no experience of preschool physical education CPD; Dawn and Stacey had not participated in any, while Alison's only experience was her attendance, with Amanda, at the two-hour launch of a sport-based pilot resource pack aimed at preschool children. Both Alison and Amanda said they found the resource pack unsuitable for preschoolers and stopped using it after a short time. As this resource appeared to have had little impact, I deemed it unlikely to have served as a primary source of physical education discourses. Early Moves, in contrast, was likely to have had a major impact, because of Amanda's and Tanya's investment in it.

Early Moves was also likely to have been a source of physical education discourses at Cheery Faces; the practitioners there had engaged in a one-day Early Moves course. The only other physical education CPD they referred to was a course Vanessa briefly mentioned encountering "years and years ago" as a student in which she learned about "different physical games...fun games" (Vanessa, Cheery Faces). The other practitioners at Cheery Faces did not mention any other courses, while the practitioners at Sunnyland said they had not participated in any preschool physical education CPD.

It was important to investigate what the participants would have experienced during Early Moves CPD, as it was likely to have served as a source of the 'physical



education' discourses they drew on in their practice and their talk. As noted, Early Moves evolved from Basic Moves. Jess *et al.* (2004) explain that Basic Moves aims "to help all children develop the basic movement competence that lays the foundation for lifelong physical activity" (p. 24). They declare that the significance of developing this foundation "cannot be overemphasised as it means children are able to pass through the proficiency barrier between the simple activities of early childhood and the more complex activities of late childhood with confidence" (pp. 24-25). These sentences show that motor skill development and physical activity discourses are privileged in Basic Moves; developing 'basic' movements and skills will allow children to 'access' various physical activities as they go through life. This contention is similar to Curriculum for Excellence's positioning of motor skill development as the 'key' to lifelong physical activity.

The Basic Moves framework is premised on the idea that the notion of a single 'gold standard' mature movement pattern for individual fundamental motor skills (e.g. running, throwing, catching) is incorrect. Instead, technically mature performance is characterised by the ability to adapt these skills so that performance is optimal in a variety of situations. This view is reflected in the framework's emphasis on both movement skills (categorised as travel, object control, and balance and co-ordination) and movement concepts (space, effort and relationships). As such, adaptability and creativity are as significant as technical performance.

Adaptability and creativity are also prominent features of the Early Moves framework (Jess & McIntyre, 2009). Along with basic movements and movement concepts, this framework features a third component – generic movements. Jess and McIntyre (2009) explain that these are non-specific movements that underlie the basic movements. Generic movements are divided into four categories (balance, co-ordination, postures, rotations) and include: static and dynamic balances; moving body sectors and body parts in various ways; maintaining upright, mid-level and lying postures; and rotating around different axes of the body. Jess and McIntyre (2009) – mentioning that research shows that children develop basic movements through a "developmental process" (p. 16) of initial emergence, a transitional phase

and then, from the age of six or seven, a mature phase – propose that most preschoolers should not be expected to reach the mature phase, but to “develop a solid generic movement foundation and begin the process of developing mature basic movements” (p. 17).

The Basic Moves and Early Moves frameworks are clearly underpinned by developmental discourses<sup>11</sup>. In the Basic Moves training manual (Jess, 2004), the first of three principles of Basic Moves is that it “must be *developmentally appropriate*” (p. 8, emphasis in original). Furthermore, Jess and McIntyre (2009) assert that they designed Early Moves in line with notions of developmental appropriateness, play and active learning. The DPEG’s work has been influenced by Gallahue’s ‘developmental physical education’ scholarship (e.g. Gallahue, 2001; Gallahue & Cleland Donnelly, 2003), which aims “to help children become literate movers by learning-to-move and learning-through-movement” (Gallahue, 2001, p. 4). As noted in Chapter Two, Gallahue’s (2001) acknowledgement that motor development is age-related and not age-dependent does not counter the criticisms of developmental discourses raised by many scholars. For instance, motor development is still positioned as a series of stages. Reliance on developmentalism is evident in Jess and McIntyre’s (2009) contention above that most preschoolers should not be expected to reach the mature movement phase. This ‘advice’ about what preschool children ‘should’ and ‘should’ not be able to do constructs a normative benchmark upon which their motor performances will be viewed and compared (Burrows & Wright, 2001).

My analysis has shown that discourses related to developmentalism and physical activity are prevalent in documentation related to Early Moves. These discourses were likely to have been operating at Oakdale and Cheery Faces, as when Amanda, Tanya, Serena, Vanessa, Sarah and Rachel attended Early Moves courses, they would have encountered the Early Moves framework and thus the discourses underpinning it. They were consequently likely to have taken up and deployed these discourses (perhaps in diverse ways) during preschool ‘physical education’. Amanda

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<sup>11</sup> This is probably not surprising since the ‘D’ in DPEG stands for ‘developmental’.

and Tanya are also likely to have further engaged with these discourses in their roles as members of a group which was constructing a preschool physical education resource pack, as this group was led by a DPEG member who had been involved with designing the Early Moves framework and conducting related CPD courses. Furthermore, Tanya's study for a postgraduate certificate in physical education for three- to 14-year-olds (again with the DPEG) meant she was likely to engage with discourses related to Early Moves and Basic Moves over a sustained period (two years). Early Moves would thus seem to have been a source of 'physical education' discourses for some of the practitioners, and to varying degrees.

Having analysed two potential sources of 'physical education' discourses, I now provide a description of 'physical education' at each setting in order to contextualise the participants' talk about the place and meaning of 'physical education' to them.

### **5.3 'Physical education' at Oakdale, Cheery Faces and Sunnyland**

#### **5.3.1 Introduction**

To describe 'physical education' at each setting, I refer to both my observations and the participants' talk. As noted, 14 adults participated in the study, while 48 children took part in group mind-mapping and/or interviews. Before providing separate discussions of 'physical education' at Oakdale, Cheery Faces and Sunnyland, I examine the practitioners' talk about the term 'physical education'.

#### **5.3.2 Practitioners' talk about the use of the term 'physical education' at preschools**

At the beginning of fieldwork, I asked the adult participants if 'physical education' was a term they used and, if not, what terms they used instead. The women at Cheery Faces and Sunnyland were in agreement that 'physical education' was not a term used at their settings, neither with children nor amongst staff. Their responses when asked if they used the terms 'physical education' or 'PE' included:

No. Like, we do talk about 'physical play', but we never use 'physical education'. (Serena, Cheery Faces)

Not in preschool, you don't hear that, no, you don't hear anybody saying, "Oh I was doing this in physical education". (Jean, Sunnyland)

Comments from all the women at Cheery Faces and Sunnyland resonated with Jean's point that 'physical education' was not a term generally used at preschools. Naomi, Annie and Vanessa spoke about the health and wellbeing subject area when explaining that 'physical education' was not a term they used. For instance, Naomi explained that:

...it's now health and wellbeing that they class it as and that looks at all healthy aspects, like, keep fit and food and stuff... (Naomi, Sunnyland)

The participants at Cheery Faces and Sunnyland appeared to interpret 'health and wellbeing' as a term used instead of 'physical education'. It seemed that they were unaware that the words 'physical education' were mentioned in the early level health and wellbeing documentation. This perhaps indicates that 'physical education' is not prioritised in the initial training, CPD and daily practice of preschool practitioners.

Along with "health and wellbeing" and "physical play" (see Serena's quote above), some of the women said they preferred to use the word 'exercise' than the term 'physical education'. For instance, Serena and Vanessa (Cheery Faces) said "physical exercise" was a term they were more comfortable with than 'physical education', thus indicating that they considered exercise to be an – if not *the* – aim of preschool 'physical education'. By replacing the word 'education' with 'exercise', they implied it was their duty to provide children with opportunities to be physically active, rather than to necessarily educate them about physical activity. This may indicate that they were concerned with working on the children's bodies. Jean at Sunnyland similarly talked about "exercise" when asked about the term 'physical education'. She explained that in health and wellbeing:

...you're looking at the whole child and say what...so you're talking about all of what they're eating and everything as well as their physical exercise. But personally, I think they should go outside and get lots of exercise. ... I think they need the exercise and they need the fresh air every day. (Jean, Sunnyland)

The words “should” and “need” characterise exercise as ‘imperative’ for children. Jean’s reference to getting “fresh air” indicates that ‘physical education’ provides a break from the indoor environment. Getting fresh air was something all five practitioners at Sunnyland talked about in relation to the children’s time in the garden. It was also something three of the children mentioned. I refer to the children’s talk later in the chapter.

Sarah similarly differentiated between indoor and outdoor spaces when explaining that, rather than ‘physical education’, ‘physical play’ was the term she and her colleagues at Cheery Faces tended to use:

...well, we say ‘physical play’. ... Not ‘physical education’ – like, “Oh we’re going to do some physical play” or “I’m going to go and do something physical with them”. ... No, I wouldn’t say ‘physical education’, ‘PE’ or something, it’s not a term that we would use amongst ourselves. ... But we would definitely say, “Oh physical play” or, like...or downstairs, right, where you’ve got the big climbing frames and stuff like that, and that would be ‘physical equipment’, you know, a bit physical for them. (Sarah, Cheery Faces)

It seems likely that “physical play” is similar to what Curriculum for Excellence terms “energetic play” (LTS, 2009c, p. 5). Sarah implies that physical play occurs in particular spaces; her reference to “big climbing frames” and “physical equipment” in the garden constructs physical play as something children engage in outdoors by using large equipment. Physical play is thus likely to involve gross motor skills (e.g. climbing). Sarah’s focus on outdoor spaces perhaps indicates that children are not expected to engage in physical play in other spaces (e.g. indoors).

Sarah’s use of the term ‘physical play’ rather than ‘physical education’ could indicate that the ‘problem’ with the term ‘physical education’ at preschools is the word ‘education’. Alison at Oakdale and, in particular, Jessica at Sunnyland supported this notion. Jessica explicitly spoke about not being comfortable with the word ‘education’ in relation to preschool contexts. This supports the work of Moyles *et al.* (2002b) and Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2002), which suggests that some early childhood practitioners may be uncomfortable with words like ‘teaching’, as they

consider themselves to be ‘facilitators’ of children’s learning and development, rather than ‘teachers’. Jessica said ‘education’ was a term more associated with schools, and consequently, ‘physical education’ was too. Jessica’s colleagues at Sunnyland aligned with her view that ‘physical education’ was a concept more associated with schools than preschools. Naomi, Ivy and Annie – along with Serena, Vanessa and Sarah at Cheery Faces – all spoke about ‘physical education’ as something more structured and formal than what children would experience at preschool. Their comments included:

And [what we do] it’s not really, like, physical education. It’s more associated with, like, school and things, I think. Like, PE – like, you get taken out for PE when you’re in primary school and, like, it’s a set class at secondary. ... More structured, I think, and...yeah. (Vanessa, Cheery Faces)

...in nurseries, you don’t have that, kind of, a lesson of this and a lesson of that and PE and home economics and history and geography and French, and it’s not the, you know... So any kind of physical activity happens in a much more informal, unstructured way, I suppose... But I guess it just...physical activity sort of happens, I suppose. (Annie, Sunnyland)

Supporting the scholarship of Moyles *et al.* (2002b) and Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2002), Vanessa and Annie appear to identify themselves as facilitators rather than teachers; they position the role of the preschool practitioner as distinct from that of the schoolteacher. Vanessa and Annie draw on discourses related to ‘structure and freedom’. They position ‘physical education’ at schools as something structured, regulated and designated to take place at a particular time. For them, ‘physical education’ at preschools just “sort of happens” in a less formal, less structured way.

The practitioners at Oakdale, in the main, expressed somewhat different views regarding the use of the term ‘physical education’ than the women at the other settings. All five agreed they used it amongst themselves. Furthermore, Amanda and Tanya told me they sometimes used the terms ‘physical education’ or ‘PE’ with the children, although they said they were flexible regarding terminology used. Because of Amanda’s and Tanya’s experiences of preschool physical education CPD, it is perhaps not surprising that they seemed somewhat more comfortable using the term

‘physical education’ in relation to preschoolers than the other participating practitioners did. As noted, however, unlike the practitioners at the other settings, the women at Oakdale said they used the term ‘physical education’ amongst themselves. This may have been because the children there – unlike those at Cheery Faces and Sunnyland – experienced a weekly physical education lesson with a physical education teacher. Stacey’s comments supported this idea:

We either call it ‘PE’ or ‘gym’ if we’re going into the big hall to do it with Mrs. Walters. ... And in terms of the physical, like, education that they do have, like, I think that’s the more formal part of it, when they go through and work with Mrs. Walters. ... There’s a lot of informal, sort of, learning that goes on in the outdoor area of the nursery, but we don’t really call that ‘PE’, we just call that ‘going outside’. [*Laughs*] (Stacey, Oakdale)

Stacey differentiates between what she terms “formal” and “informal” ‘physical education’ in this excerpt; ‘physical education’ refers to the structured, “formal” experiences the children have in the gym hall with Tanya, while the experiences they have outside of these weekly lessons are “informal”. While positioning them as ‘physical education’ experiences, Stacey explains that she does not usually refer to them in this way.

In a later interview, Stacey drew on developmental discourses to explain that she did not use the terms ‘physical education’ or ‘PE’ with the children as these concepts were too “abstract” for preschoolers:

...because they don’t spell and they don’t know words, so they don’t know that ‘PE’ stands for physical education. So I think I try and just call it ‘gym’ now because they associate that with the place. ... for the young children who’ve not been in a school or a nursery before, ‘PE’ doesn’t mean anything; it’s just letters and they don’t know what they stand for, so it’s a bit abstract for them. (Stacey, Oakdale)

Stacey’s comments appear to position preschool children as deficient and incompetent (Woodrow & Press, 2007), showing how developmental discourses promote normative understandings of children’s abilities (Burrows & Wright, 2001; Robinson & Jones Díaz, 2006). Alison and Dawn similarly explained that they

tended to use the words “gym” and “gym hall” because they were more concrete concepts that would be easier for children of preschool age to understand. Furthermore, Alison spoke about the term ‘physical education’ in a similar way to the practitioners at the other settings; she was not comfortable with it in relation to preschool contexts. Like Jessica, she positioned the word ‘education’ as problematic. Alison’s and Jessica’s discussions about ‘education’ are explored in more detail in Chapter Six, when I examine the participants’ engagements with developmental discourses.

In conclusion, most of the participating practitioners said they did not use the term ‘physical education’ with regard to preschools. They were in general agreement, however, that even if they did not use the term ‘physical education’, it was something the children did experience. For example, Jean stated:

But not that the children aren’t actually doing it, it’s just that it’s not classed as that. (Jean, Sunnyland)

The practitioners’ talk indicated that ‘PE’ and ‘physical education’ were not terms most of the children would have been familiar with. I therefore did not use these terms with them; I used language they were familiar with and asked them about, for example, the ‘gym hall’, ‘playground’ or ‘garden’. I draw on both the adults’ and children’s talk now – along with my field-notes – to provide a description of ‘physical education’ at each setting.

### **5.3.3 Oakdale**

As noted in Chapter Four, 21 of my 28 observations at Oakdale were of physical education lessons in the gym hall. Alison and Dawn usually accompanied the children and stayed during the lessons. When Amanda was the nursery teacher, she stayed too, but when Stacey took over, she did not, as this was her time for planning and preparation. When I asked Tanya, Amanda, Alison and Dawn about their roles in the lessons, they explained that Tanya led them, while the other staff played supporting roles. Amanda, for instance, explained that she, Alison and Dawn encouraged the children to listen to Tanya and then assisted them with their



activities. In the lessons I observed, the women consistently played the roles they described. The following excerpt from my field-notes illustrates this:

Tanya asks the children to sit down “in a safe place”. She says that this time she wants them to jump around in their [space] bubbles<sup>12</sup>. When all the children stand up and start jumping, Rosie again stands still in the centre of the room. Dawn goes over and tries to encourage her. She takes her by the hand and leads her around... (Oakdale field-notes, 5-May-2010)

The lessons generally followed a similar format. The nursery practitioners would bring the children to the gym hall, where they would sit on the floor in front of Tanya. Tanya would introduce a theme (e.g. balance) or explain an activity. She often demonstrated what she was talking about, or asked children to demonstrate. Sometimes she asked the children to try out what she was talking about while they were still gathered together. She then encouraged them to go out into the space and try the task. Tanya would then call the children back together to discuss what they had been doing. She would lead them in advancing the task by encouraging them to share ideas and demonstrate what they had been doing, or introduce a new task. The lessons usually consisted of a series of such sequences.

Reflecting the Early Moves framework, the themes and tasks related to movement skills (e.g. balance, locomotion, object control) and movement concepts (e.g. space, under, through). Tanya used an array of equipment, ranging from large gymnastics apparatus (e.g. boxes, wall bars) to small equipment (e.g. beanbags, hula hoops). The following excerpt from my field-notes details how equipment was used, and the types of themes and tasks the lessons typically involved:

Approximately half of the gym hall is taken up with equipment, such as hula hoops, benches, cones, a large box and a smaller box. ... Tanya mentions ‘balances’ numerous times, along with shapes. ... While they are still sitting down, Tanya asks the children to think about all of the different balances that they can do on the equipment. She then asks them to walk down and do as many balances as they can on the various pieces of equipment. (Oakdale field-notes, 31-March-2010)

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<sup>12</sup> The space bubble is a notion practitioners learn about at Early Moves CPD courses. Focusing on helping children to develop awareness of the movement concept of space, it involves children imagining they are enclosed in an individual bubble and doing a variety of activities within it.

The two excerpts presented show that the lessons featured a concern with motor skill and movement concept development. The space bubble activity particularly reflects the influence of Early Moves. This activity also aligns with the Curriculum for Excellence early level physical education experience and outcome relating to “finding out how to use and share space” (LTS, 2009c, p. 5). Although Tanya provided guidance, tasks were often open-ended, allowing children to experiment with the generic movements discussed in the Early Moves documentation. In this way, practices related to ‘structure and freedom’ were evident; although the lessons were adult-led, there were elements of freedom in that the children could explore different activities and equipment. Similar to the lessons featuring a mastery motivational climate in Martin *et al.*’s (2009) study of kindergarteners’ motor skill development in physical education, notions of choices, freedom and play were enmeshed with a focus on motor skill development.

In her interviews, Tanya often spoke about motor skills and movement, but when asked about the focus of her preschool physical education lessons, these were not concepts she initially mentioned. She said her priority was helping the children become comfortable with the gym hall, the equipment, and her as a teacher, explaining that this was:

...hugely important, because if you, kind of, turn them off when they’re three or four, then we’re going to have huge problems for the next seven years with them. So probably that is one of my biggest things, is just getting them comfortable and then getting them also so that they don’t have a fear of equipment. Like, I hate when they get further up the school and you get the girls that’ll run away from the ball. Like, I absolutely hate that, I just...I want them to be comfortable. They might not be the best player in the world or the best whatever in the world, but if they can be comfortable and not scared of all the different equipment, that’s probably a big thing. (Tanya, Oakdale)

Tanya engages in classification (Gore, 1995) by referring to “girls” who avoid participating in physical education as they get older. This reference to future participation aligns with the concern with lifelong physical activity in both Curriculum for Excellence and Early Moves. However, by focusing on children’s feelings, Tanya seems to resist the notion that skill development is the ‘key’ to future

engagement in physical activity; she positions feeling comfortable and secure as more significant than performance of particular skills. She drew on developmental discourses to explain that giving preschool children “freedom” to explore and “experiment” was more important to her than their performance of specific skills:

...at nursery, a lot of it's generic movement, so it is just giving them the freedom to be able to try things and come up with their own ideas and experiment, but giving them a safe environment to do it. ... Which is where I find it really hard with the three-year-olds, because I don't want to be the person saying, “No, no, no” all the time, but then when it...if it's not safe, it's very difficult, you know, not to use the word ‘no’ a lot. ... Yeah, just trying to give them a bit of freedom to try things. (Tanya, Oakdale)

Tanya's reference to “generic movement” shows her investment in notions privileged by Early Moves. Despite her emphasis on “freedom”, her mentions of safety construct a ‘need’ for a more adult-led approach to some activities. Her reference to struggling with being the only person to say “no” to the children suggests that, in her view, preschool education is generally a free, open, playful environment in which children are not restricted regarding activities and equipment. Her talk is indicative of how she, as a physical education teacher (i.e. qualified to teach secondary and primary physical education), initially found teaching preschool children difficult. I discuss in Chapter Six how she openly talked about these initial struggles, describing how she hated feeling so out of her ‘comfort zone’.

While Tanya's comments above position children's feelings as more important than their performance of motor skills, her colleague Stacey talked about the importance of motor skill development to children's future participation in physical education and physical activity:

...I think it [preschool physical education] should be getting them to do...encouraging them in their sort of gross motor skills, seeing where they're at and getting them to the next level. Things like running, just simple things, like, because they need the basic skills, like running, walking, hopping, jumping for, like, sports and for when they're doing PE further up the school. ... So throwing, things like that. (Stacey, Oakdale)

Although Stacey had not participated in Early Moves CPD, her comments align with its aims and focus. She told me the physical education she experienced during her initial teacher education focused on fundamental movement skill development. Her comments may also reflect Curriculum for Excellence's contention that physical education should provide learners with opportunities to "develop the concepts and skills necessary for participation in a wide range of physical activity, sport, dance and outdoor learning" (LTS, 2009c, p. 5). The claim that children 'need' to develop particular skills in order to 'access' sports and other physical activities when they are older is regularly cited throughout the literature as a justification for physical education (e.g. Derri *et al.*, 2001; Jess *et al.*, 2004). I suggest, however, that the relationship between motor skill development in childhood and physical activity participation in adulthood is likely to be more tenuous than is often implied. Characterising motor skill development and physical activity participation as linked in a linear cause-and-effect manner obscures the multitude of factors that may impact on people's physical activity participation in adulthood and ignores the daily realities of many people's lives (Gard & Wright, 2005). Stacey, however, was apparently so strongly invested in the motor skill development discourse that she could not think of any other focus physical education could (or should) have:

I'm trying to...I'm genuinely trying to think of another way of doing PE!  
[Laughs] (Stacey, Oakdale)

The children also drew on a discourse related to movement skills and concepts when asked about their physical education lessons. During mind-mapping, many responses related to using equipment and resources such as bubbles. Most of the children had participated in bubble activities with Tanya just prior to taking part in mind-mapping, so I was not surprised to find that bubbles were something many of them spoke about. They told me about different things they could do with bubbles:

Popping the bubbles. (Elle, Oakdale, mind-mapping)

Catching bubbles and kicking them. (Colin, Oakdale, mind-mapping)

These comments show that bubble activities in physical education involved motor skills. Many other responses during both mind-mapping and interviews also concerned motor skills. Examples include:

Swinging on the ropes. (Colin, Oakdale, mind-mapping)

I was playing with a ball. (Joshua, Oakdale, mind-mapping)

I'm going to draw playing with a ball. (Beth, Oakdale, mind-mapping)

I like going through things. (Maggie, Oakdale, mind-mapping)

I like playing on the climbing bars. (Matthew, Oakdale, mind-mapping)

*[Re picture of hula hoops]* ...you try to throw the yellow ball over them.  
(Maggie, Oakdale, interview)

*[Re beanbags]* Sometimes we put them on our heads. ... You have to keep it on without making it fall off. (Beth, Oakdale, interview)

*[Re balls]* Chuck them up high. (Sam, Oakdale, interview)

These quotes show that the children frequently referred to equipment when asked about the gym hall. This is not surprising, since – as explained in Chapter Four – I regularly showed and asked them to talk about photographs of equipment. The quotes also show that, when talking about equipment, the children frequently drew on discourses related to motor skills; they related the equipment to large motor skills (e.g. climbing), as well as fundamental motor skills (e.g. ball skills).

The above quotes show that, although the lessons were adult-led, some children talked about physical education also involving play. Joshua, Beth and Matthew were not the only children to mention play when asked about their physical education lessons; in their interviews, Lisa, Erin, Elle and Sam did too. All references the children made to play in the gym hall concerned play with equipment. Since the activities they did with this equipment usually related to movement skills and

concepts (e.g. going through hula hoops, throwing balls), all of their references to play in the gym hall were linked with a motor skill discourse.

Practitioners Alison and Dawn also talked about motor skill development, but – like Tanya – more in terms of children’s feelings than performance of specific skills. These women talked about the importance of developing children’s confidence, and they particularly emphasised that children should have fun. Apparently aligning with Curriculum for Excellence’s emphasis on enjoyment, fun was a concept Alison and Dawn characterised as significant in terms of children’s future participation in physical education and physical activity. Alison referred to her own experiences of physical education at high school, telling me that, while she enjoyed it, others came up with “loads of excuses to get out of certain PE activities” (Alison, Oakdale). Alison and Dawn were in agreement that enjoyable physical education experiences were vital in order to prevent such unwillingness to participate.

Amanda too positioned fun and enjoyment as crucial elements of ‘physical education’, particularly for children for whom a focus on motor skill development may not have been relevant:

I think they need to learn to enjoy it; I think they need to, like, in that respect. And being able to participate in different...like, at different levels, because there are some children that will never develop a very good skill set, so you can’t be entirely aimed at that, because some children will just never be able to achieve that. ... So that’s why you need to have the wider approach, so that those children realise that going...you know, having an active life through going for walks and that sort of thing will also keep you healthy and keep you active. (Amanda, Oakdale)

Like her colleagues, Amanda appears to align with Curriculum for Excellence’s concern with children’s future participation in physical activity. In the above excerpt, she positions enjoyment of ‘physical education’ as more important to this goal than motor skill development. Amanda also draws on a health discourse. This discourse was prevalent in her talk and I interrogate her engagement with it in depth in Chapter Seven. Amanda’s initial response when asked about the focus of preschool ‘physical education’ was that it should create opportunities for children to be physically active:

Just, like, making children see that there is the potential to be physically active in so many different ways. ... Yeah, to, like, just to raise their heart-rate! ... You know, singing doesn't just have to be singing, you can do actions and crazy dancing with the singing. ... You know, that it doesn't have to be, like, PE as going to the gym hall and we'll do it like that, that that's not the only way that you can keep yourself healthy, you know, fit and healthy. Like, going out on the bikes, like, that's PE, and, like, hammering in nails, that's PE. (Amanda, Oakdale)

Amanda's mention of raising children's heart-rates constructs 'physical education' in terms of a biomedical or health promotion model, as if the point of 'physical education' is to burn calories and prevent obesity. She stresses, however, that children should learn that physical education lessons are not the only avenue for physical activity. This indicates that she feels 'physical education' should involve learning, rather than just calorie-burning (although this learning appears to be *about* calorie-burning).

On three occasions I observed Amanda discussing concepts related to health and physical activity with the children. These discussions took place in the nursery, either directly before or after physical education lessons. The following excerpt from my field-notes details one of them:

[Amanda] tells [the children] that "it's very important that we go to PE". She explains that "exercise is very important, so that we move our bodies and keep ourselves fit". She emphasises that we can be active in a variety of different ways and places; in PE, outside in the playground, in the nursery. She asks if anybody knows why it is important that we do PE and exercise. ... Ashleigh says, "To keep fit and healthy". "That's right," says Amanda, "to keep fit and healthy and strong". She asks Maggie why PE and exercise are important. Maggie doesn't say anything. She then asks Matthew; he stays silent too. Amanda says, "It's so we can run around and enjoy ourselves when we're doing our activities and not get tired". Ashleigh says again, "To get fit". Amanda asks if anybody knows what 'to get fit' means. Ashleigh says it means to be fit and strong. Amanda explains, "We only get one body, it's very precious and we need to look after it". She then asks the children if they can think of other ways that we can look after our bodies. Ashleigh says, "We can eat lots of fruit and get flu jabs". Amanda agrees with her, explaining that it's also very important to give our bodies lots of healthy food. (Oakdale field-notes, 28-April-2010)

In this excerpt, Amanda positions physical education as a means of working on children's bodies. She strongly portrays the message that exercise, fitness and health are "very important". Amanda primarily talks about health, exercise and physical activity in terms of physical health. Even her reference to enjoying physical activity characterises enjoyment as a result of not getting "tired". She encourages the children to engage in bodywork (Brace-Govan, 2002) in order to "look after" their bodies and thus be "fit", "healthy" and "strong". In this way, she promotes the notion of engaging in self-monitoring and self-regulation in order to be 'healthy' subjects. Research indicates that these practices could be problematic as they could cause some children to experience feelings such as guilt, worry and unhappiness (Burrows & Wright, 2004; Evans, 2003; Gard & Wright, 2001). Thus, while Amanda may have had benevolent intentions, encouraging children to engage in such practices could potentially have been damaging to their health and wellbeing (Evans, 2003; Evans *et al.*, 2011; Quennerstedt, 2008; Wright & Dean, 2007).

I observed Stacey having a similar discussion with the children. Like Amanda, she talked about exercise and health:

Stacey told the children that when they got to the gym hall, she wanted them to "listen to everything that Mrs. Walters says and do everything that Mrs. Walters says". She also said, "We do PE 'cause exercise is very important, isn't it? We've got little bones and little muscles and we've got to work them out often to make sure we're fit and healthy." (Oakdale field-notes, 29-September-2010)

Stacey too talks about physical education in relation to exercise, and links exercise with fitness and health. She speaks about exercise in terms of working on people's bodies, particularly their "bones" and "muscles"; she thus characterises the body as an object to be monitored and disciplined (Shilling, 2003). Like Amanda, Stacey positions exercise as 'necessary' by telling the children it is "very important" and something they must do ("we've got to"). She engages in classification (Gore, 1995) by positioning Tanya (Mrs. Walters) as an expert who the children must listen to and obey.



Given these discussions, it is perhaps not surprising that the children too talked about health and exercise when asked about ‘physical education’. Their talk demonstrated the strength of health and physical activity discourses by illustrating that even children who had not yet started school were concerned with these notions. Russell was the first child to draw on these discourses:

NOLLAIG: In the gym hall, what do you do?

RUSSELL: Em...you pop bubbles and you make sure your body is healthy and fit.

(Russell, Oakdale, mind-mapping)

Russell characterises physical education lessons as related in some way to health and fitness. Later in the mind-mapping session, he brought up the notion of exercise:

NOLLAIG: I know you’ve all told me all about the bubbles and about using the different parts of your body – do you ever do anything else in the gym hall?

...

RUSSELL: Em...we exercise our bodies.

NOLLAIG: “We exercise our bodies”. ... Who knows what ‘exercise’ means?

ASHLEIGH: I know, I know.

NOLLAIG: What about you, Ashleigh?

ASHLEIGH: It means we have to keep our body fit.

(Russell and Ashleigh, Oakdale, mind-mapping)

Ashleigh connects exercise and fitness; she talks about exercise in terms of keeping fit, and positions fitness as necessary (“we have to”). Both children refer to the body, indicating that they are talking about exercise in corporeal terms. They position the gym hall as a space where bodies are exercised and worked on.

Other children also talked about exercise, fitness and related concepts when asked about the gym hall during mind-mapping. For instance, both Joanna and Colin referred to exercise. Melanie did too, although she did not use the word directly: when asked about what she did in the gym hall, she said “training” (Melanie, Oakdale, mind-mapping). Melanie was the only child to use the word “training” and this was the only time she used it. I was surprised at her use of this word, particularly

as I had not heard the practitioners mention it. By providing the example of star jumps, Melanie indicated that “training” referred to physical activity and exercise. She thus appeared to position physical education in terms of working on her body, “training” her perhaps to be healthy or for participation in physical activity in future.

Exercise, fitness and health were words some of the children also mentioned in their interviews. For instance, when I asked Maggie and Colin (in separate interviews) about why they went to the gym hall, they spoke about exercise. Maggie talked about exercise in terms of physical activity, which she positioned as imperative:

- NOLLAIG: And do you know why do you go to the gym hall?  
MAGGIE: Because you’ve got to do...you’ve got to do exercises.  
NOLLAIG: Okay. Why do you have to do exercises?  
MAGGIE: To make you run.  
NOLLAIG: To make you run? Oh, is running an exercise?  
MAGGIE: Yeah.

(Maggie, Oakdale, interview)

Colin agreed that exercise was something he ‘had to do’. When I asked him if he did exercise anywhere else at nursery, apart from the gym hall, he differentiated between physical education in the gym hall and ‘physical education’ in the playground by drawing on a discourse related to play:

- NOLLAIG: Is there any other place that you do exercises?  
COLIN: No.  
NOLLAIG: No? What about when you’re outside in the yard?  
COLIN: No, we just play and run around.  
NOLLAIG: You just play? Is that different?  
COLIN: I play with Jason because he’s a bad dinosaur.  
NOLLAIG: You play around with Jason? And is it different when you’re just playing, than when you’re in the gym hall?  
COLIN: It’s different when we’re just playing.  
NOLLAIG: Is that different?  
COLIN: Yeah.

(Colin, Oakdale, interview)

Colin talks about “just playing” and running around outside, indicating that physical education in the gym hall is more structured and adult-led. Colin also characterises exercise as something that should be structured; he talks about running around in the

playground as not being exercise. His references to both physically active play (“run around”) and imaginative play (“bad dinosaur”) illustrate that the children engaged in different types of play in the playground. His two uses of the word “just” when talking about play appear to position it as less important than the adult-led lessons in the gym hall.

Colin’s comments align with the differentiation Stacey made between “formal” and “informal” ‘physical education’. She too talked about play as a major feature of the children’s more “informal” ‘physical education’. As noted in Chapter Four, the children had daily opportunities to go outside to a small playground. Their time in the playground (at least on the occasions I observed them) was less structured than during physical education in the gym hall. The practitioners did not lead them in activities, but took more of a backseat role, allowing them to play more freely, but setting up and joining in with activities if children wanted them to. The following excerpts from my field-notes illustrate this:

Four of the girls are cycling around the yard. Four boys and one girl are running. Another girl joins in. Two boys are playing with the sand. Joanna is sitting on top of the wooden climbing frame. Dawn – the learning assistant – is jumping and dancing with a group of six children. (Oakdale field-notes, 10-March-2010)

Gavin, Colin, Lisa and three other children (two girls and a boy) are on bikes and scooters. ... [Alison] has set up a hoop which is held up by metal rods, and placed a ball in front of it for the children to kick through. She has also taken out four plastic skittles and placed a cone a short distance away from it with a ball on top. She has also now taken out a pink Swiss ball and is setting up a game with some of the children. Eight children are in a circle around her. She calls a girl’s name and rolls her the ball. (Oakdale field-notes, 15-September-2010)

These excerpts show that, in the playground, the children had opportunities to participate in activities that would allow them to practise their motor skills, although in a less guided way than during their lessons in the gym hall. Seemingly reflecting Curriculum for Excellence’s emphasis on “energetic play” (LTS, 2009c, p. 5), the children had opportunities to engage in physically vigorous activities such as cycling, running and dancing. They could also choose, like Joanna, to remain sedentary. It

seemed that while the children had a certain degree of freedom and agency during physical education in the gym hall, they had much more during their experiences in the outdoor space. While I noted earlier that some of the children made reference to playing during their physical education lessons, their talk indicated that they had more opportunities to play in the outdoor area than in the gym hall. They tended to speak about motor skills and health in relation to what they did in the gym hall, while play was something they spoke about mostly in terms of what they did outside. Their comments, when asked about what they did in the playground, included:

*[Excitedly]* Play! ... *[Excitedly]* Play on the bikes! (Rosie, Oakdale, interview)

...I like playing games. ... Eh...play *Ghostbusters*. (Colin, Oakdale, interview)

Play – play on the chute. (Elle, Oakdale, interview)

Well, there's only some bikes, that some people have to play on the climbing frame and some people have to play in the house. (Lisa, Oakdale, interview)

Similar to their comments about their physical education lessons, many responses again related to equipment, with bikes mentioned frequently; all seven children who were participants over the full period of fieldwork talked about bikes. This indicates that they had opportunities to participate in physically active play in the playground, as well as chances to practise the skill of cycling. Elle's reference to the chute and Lisa's mention of the climbing frame show that play in the playground also involved gross motor skills such as climbing. Lisa's and Colin's references to the playhouse and to *Ghostbusters* indicate that the children also engaged in imaginative play in the playground. Thus, the children talked about engaging in different types of play outside, not just play with equipment, which was what they mentioned when talking about play in their physical education lessons.

Discourses related to motor skills, play, and physical activity and health were prevalent in the talk and practice of the participants at Oakdale. A concern with

motor skill and movement concept development, which was particularly evident, seemed to reflect the influence of Early Moves.

I now provide a description of ‘physical education’ at Cheery Faces in order to discuss the discourses I identified at this setting.

#### **5.3.4 Cheery Faces**

As noted in Chapter Four, 18 of my 22 observations at Cheery Faces took place outdoors, while four occurred indoors. Eleven of the outdoor observations were of free play situations, one was solely of adult-led activities, and six featured elements of both. Indoors, I observed one free play situation, two that were adult-led, and one that contained features of both. The following excerpt from my field-notes details an occasion I deemed to have been a free play situation. It occurred outdoors:

Eleanor has climbed up the ladder and swung across the monkey bars to the tree-house. Amber does it too. ... Bill is on one of the swings. He is leaning on it on his stomach and swinging back and forth. Eleanor has gone over to the second swing. She stands up on it briefly, and then gets down and goes to a different area of the play park. Ian is sprinting around the play park with a wheelbarrow. Vanessa is standing beside the slide. A number of children are queuing up in the tree-house to slide down. One at a time, they slide down and then stay on the end of the slide, so that there ends up being a row of children along the slide, like a traffic jam. The children seem to find this activity very funny. Vanessa encourages it, reminding them to lift their feet up as they slide, so as not to hurt the person they slide into. (Cheery Faces field-notes, 22-April-2010)

In this instance, Vanessa played a supervisory, supportive role. The occasions I considered to have been more adult-led featured the practitioners playing more direct roles by leading activities. The following excerpt details an occasion when Sarah played such a role in the garden:

Sarah asks the children to hold hands in a circle. She leads them in blowing up an imaginary bubble and then says, “Pop!” She then asks the children to blow up their own individual space bubbles (they are no longer holding hands). She encourages them to turn around in their bubbles to make sure that they have enough space. Sarah then asks them to run around the yard, being careful not to pop their bubbles. (Cheery Faces field-notes, 10-June-2010)

Vanessa played a similar role during *Sticky Kids* indoors, when I observed her encouraging the children by “singing along and doing all of the activities with the children” (Cheery Faces field-notes, 6-May-2010). Therefore, the practitioners’ roles in the children’s ‘physical education’ varied; on some occasions, they played backseat, supervisory roles, at other times, they led activities. Sometimes they did both. For instance, on one occasion, I observed Vanessa leading the children in doing an obstacle course, before allowing them to play freely for the remainder of the session. Similarly, during an indoor observation, the children were free to play with the soft equipment for the first part of the session, while Vanessa led them in musical physical activities for the latter part. It is important to note that the notions of free play and adult-led activities are not necessarily dichotomous. As the above excerpts show, free play usually involved a certain degree of adult input (e.g. encouragement, warnings about safety). Similarly, adult-led activities often featured elements of choices and freedom. It is therefore more appropriate to conceptualise these notions in terms of a continuum, rather than a dualism. Conceiving of play and adult-led activities in this way aligns with the work of scholars such as Siraj-Blatchford (2005) and Wood (2007b), who recommend balanced, integrated pedagogical approaches in early childhood education.

The varied roles the practitioners played illustrate that discourses related to ‘structure and freedom’ regarding ‘physical education’ operated at Cheery Faces. The above excerpts show that discourses related to motor skill development were also evident; like at Oakdale, some of the adult-led activities reflected the movement skills and concepts featured in the Early Moves framework (e.g. space bubble activities). The children also had opportunities to practise motor skills during free play, as they could use equipment the practitioners made available for them (e.g. balance beams, racquets). They also had the chance to engage in physically vigorous activities – or “energetic play” (LTS, 2009c, p. 5) – like cycling and running, both during free play and more structured ‘physical education’; physical activity was a prominent theme of *Sticky Kids*.

When I asked the children about ‘physical education’, they drew on ‘structure and freedom’ discourses. Most of their talk centred on play, but they made some references to adult-led activities. For instance, Eleanor, Ben, Michelle, Taylor and Amber all mentioned ‘playground’ games that involved the adults playing leading roles. They talked about games such as ‘duck, duck, goose’, which involved children sitting in a circle and taking turns, two at a time, to chase each other around. Some children also spoke about *Sticky Kids*. The adult-led activity most of them talked about, however, was the space bubble activity. As noted, references to this activity reflect the influence of Early Moves. I show in Chapter Six how the children talked about the space bubble activity in different ways, sometimes in terms of enjoying it, but at other times in a more negative way.

Despite these references to adult-led activities, the children primarily talked about play. When asked about what they did in the garden, responses included:

We play in the trampoline... (Taylor, Cheery Faces, mind-mapping)

I play on the climbing frame and then the swings. (Aidan, Cheery Faces, mind-mapping)

I like to play with the trikes. (Bill, Cheery Faces, mind-mapping)

...I actually play the big ‘spider spider’ game. (Chuck, Cheery Faces, mind-mapping)

We play on the slide and we go up there and down the chute and then we go back up again and then the monkey bars, if we were playing ‘sharky sharky’ and then Taylor has to be the shark. (Amber, Cheery Faces interview)

I like playing on the tractor... (Ian, Cheery Faces, interview)

...I played on the swings and on the chute. (Kristen, Cheery Faces, interview)

These quotes show that, like the children at Oakdale, the children at Cheery Faces talked about different types of play. Chuck’s reference to the ‘spider spider’ game and Amber’s mention of ‘sharky sharky’ – which four other children also talked

about – indicate that the children engaged in imaginative play in the outdoor area. In fact, all 12 children at Cheery Faces spoke about imaginative play at some point during their mind-mapping sessions and interviews. All 12 also talked about physically active play. Often they talked about play that was both imaginative and physically active. For instance, Aidan explained that ‘sharky sharky’ featured both types of play, as it involved running away from someone who was pretending to be a shark.

As at Oakdale, many of the children’s comments about play related to equipment, with trikes and other vehicles a regular talking point. Their frequent references to trikes and vehicles illustrate that they had opportunities for both physically active play and for practising the skill of pedalling. Their references to larger equipment (e.g. climbing frame) show they had opportunities to practise gross motor skills. In this way, the children’s talk about play included many references (either directly or indirectly) to physical activity and motor skills.

The practitioners also drew on these discourses when asked about the point or focus of preschool ‘physical education’. Sarah, for instance, expressed a concern with encouraging lifelong physical activity. She spoke about the importance of motor skill development in this regard, explicitly mentioning the influence of Early Moves:

...I think it builds their confidence because it’s...because, you know, when you go to school, it is such a big push and, you know, you don’t want to be the last person picked, you know, because you can’t throw, you can’t run and stuff like that. I think at this...because what Jasmine [who led the Early Moves course] was saying, if you focus on these things just now, then when they have their big power stretch when they’re six years old, then, you know, their ability’s going to be more...they’re going to be able to...if they feel that they can do stuff, then they’re confident do it and I think that’s a big step as well. (Sarah, Cheery Faces)

Similar to Tanya, Alison and Dawn at Oakdale, Sarah talks about motor skills in terms of children’s confidence. Her reference to being “the last person picked” is similar to Derri *et al.*’s (2001) description of the potential embarrassment and fear of injury and ridicule that young children who fail to develop fundamental motor skills



may face if trying to learn them in later life. Sarah draws on developmental discourses when expressing an expectation about six-year-olds, explicitly saying that this was something she learned at Early Moves. As discussed in Chapter Two, such simplistic age-related classifications ignore the richness and complexity of children's lives and experiences (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007). They also provide the benchmark upon which children are compared (Fleer, 2006) and consequently can be “normative and exclusionary” (Burrows & Wright, 2001, p. 179).

Like Sarah, Rachel mentioned the influence of Early Moves on her thoughts about preschool ‘physical education’. She spoke about the importance of children developing “skills like throwing and catching” and said that “having been involved in the Early Moves programme you maybe have got an awareness that you wouldn't otherwise have” (Rachel, Cheery Faces).

Serena and Vanessa similarly commented that the main focus of ‘physical education’ should be motor skill development:

- VANESSA: Yeah, skill development I think is a big one. Probably, like, gross motor skills and...well, like, motor skills in general.
- SERENA: Because I think they're all quite active and they do all like physical play. Like, you don't get any of them just sitting there, not wanting to join in; they do all join in. So it is probably more for developing their skills as well.
- NOLLAIG: Okay, because they tend to be quite active anyway?
- SERENA: Yeah.
- NOLLAIG: So that's not something that you need to really push or whatever?
- SERENA: Uh-huh, it's not something that's really a problem, to be honest.

(Serena and Vanessa, Cheery Faces)

By seemingly positioning children as ‘naturally’ physically active, Serena and Vanessa characterise physical activity as something they as practitioners do not need to be concerned about. They thus appear, in this instance, to resist notions that preschoolers need adult encouragement in order to engage in exercise practices.

Sarah took a contrasting view. As well as talking about motor skill development, she drew on discourses related to physical activity and health when talking about the focus of preschool ‘physical education’. Apparently reflecting Curriculum for Excellence, she positioned ‘physical education’ as an important site for encouraging children to be physically active in order to prevent obesity. According to Sarah, children need encouragement and guidance regarding ‘physical education’; this perhaps explains why I observed her taking a more leading role than her colleagues in the children’s physical activities. Like the practitioners at Oakdale, she talked about the importance of skill development and enjoyment for future participation in physical activity. She thus spoke about ‘physical education’ in terms of preventing obesity now, and providing children with a ‘foundation’ to prevent in it later life.

The children at Cheery Faces also engaged with discourses related to health and physical activity. Their talk about these notions was sometimes interwoven throughout their discussions of play and more structured activities. For instance, Ian and Bill talked about exercise when telling me about ‘sharky sharky’:

- NOLLAIG: Is it a game everybody plays?  
 IAN: It’s so fun because you need to whenever...you need to exercise first, but...  
 NOLLAIG: Oh you need to exercise first? What does that mean?  
 IAN: But I never exercise.  
 NOLLAIG: But what does exercise mean? Can you tell me some of the things you do if you’re exercising?  
 BILL: You have to...you have to do exercise because you have to run.  
 NOLLAIG: Oh running – is that an exercise?  
 BILL: Yeah.  
 NOLLAIG: So sometimes do you do exercises outside in the garden?  
 BILL: Yeah.  
 IAN: Yeah.  
 NOLLAIG: Yeah?  
 IAN: Like air bubbles. ... Space bubbles.  
 (Ian and Bill, Cheery Faces, interview)

In this excerpt, Ian explicitly links the adult-led space bubble activities with exercise. Bill equates exercise with physical activity, constructing it as necessary with the words “you have to”. Ian engages with the notion of exercise in a different way to

Bill in declaring that he “never” does it. He appears to resist the notion that exercise is something “you have to” do. He subsequently seems to contradict himself – reflecting the poststructural view of subjectivity as fluid and conflicted (Weedon, 1997) – when I ask the boys if they do exercises in the garden and he says he does. Ian could be indicating, however, that he resists the more adult-led space bubble ‘exercises’, but finds the child-led ‘sharky sharky’ activity more “fun”. Fun was something many of the children at Cheery Faces mentioned when asked about the garden. For instance, Aidan and Taylor said they liked going to the garden because it was fun. Similarly, when I asked Amber and Ben (in separate interviews) if they could tell me about why they went to the garden, their responses were:

Yeah – ’cause it’s great fun for us. (Amber, Cheery Faces, interview)

’Cause it’s fun. (Ben, Cheery Faces, interview)

Other children gave different, but related, reasons for going to the garden. For Dan, it was to play, while both Ian and Bill said it was to get fresh air. The children, like many of the practitioners, thus characterised outdoor ‘physical education’ as something that should not be too regulated or structured. The emphasis on having fun, playing and getting fresh air characterises ‘physical education’ as a break from the indoor environment.

As noted above, Ian spoke about exercise in relation to both adult-led activities and play. Along with getting fresh air, he mentioned exercise when asked about why he went outside, and he again connected it to the adult-led space bubble activity. Dan and David, on the other hand, talked about exercise as something they did during their child-led activities. They connected outdoor play with exercise when asked if they ever did exercise in the garden:

DAN: *[Standing up and leaving the table]* We do this.

DAVID: Sometimes we do.

*[Dan starts jumping around the room]*

NOLLAIG: Oh, Dan is showing me. Is that an exercise? You’re jumping around. Do you do that outside sometimes?

DAN: *[Jumping around the room]* We do this.

DAVID           And sometimes we...

NOLLAIG:       *[To Dan]* Wow.

DAN:            We do that.

DAVID:           ...we go in the tractor to go really fast and we...

DAN:            And that makes us healthy.

NOLLAIG:       *[To David]* Oh, is that like an exercise?

DAN:            Yeah.

NOLLAIG:       If you're in the tractor, going really fast?

DAN:            That's...

DAVID:           Yeah, and that's...

DAN:            Yeah, that's a exercise.

DAVID:           That's...

NOLLAIG:       Is it?

DAVID:           That's how the...you all...you zoom and then all your  
bones...then you might get all tired and then the...you...your  
bones will be healthy.

(Dan and David, Cheery Faces, interview)

By giving the examples of jumping and going fast on the tractor, Dan and David equate exercise with physical activity. Both boys then connect exercise and physical activity with health. David specifically talks about vigorous physical activity (“you zoom”), which makes you “all tired”, leading to physical health. Dan and David talked about physical activity, exercise and health on numerous occasions during their interviews. I explore their engagement with these notions in more detail in Chapter Seven.

Like Dan, David and Ian, the other children gave a variety of examples of physical activities when asked about exercise. For instance, Amber and Michelle talked about running and jumping, Ben and Kristen referred to stretching, and Ben and Michelle spoke of lifting “heavy stuff” to become “strong” (Michelle, Cheery Faces, interview). Ben and Bill explicitly connected exercise and health, by mentioning exercise when asked if they ever did anything at nursery to help them to be healthy.

Discourses related to play, motor skills, and physical activity and health underpinned ‘physical education’ at Cheery Faces. Play was also prevalent in the talk and practice of the participants at Sunnyland, as were concerns with physical activity and health and – to a lesser extent – motor skills.

### **5.3.5 Sunnyland**

‘Physical education’ at Sunnyland usually involved going to the garden, although sometimes (e.g. if it was raining) the children participated in *Sticky Kids* indoors. The 11 occasions I observed the participants in the garden were primarily free play situations; the children were free to choose equipment to use and activities to engage in. The practitioners generally played backseat, supervisory roles. I never saw them lead activities that all children were requested to participate in, but on some occasions, I observed them setting up activities and encouraging any children who were interested in taking part. The following excerpts from my field-notes provide examples of what I observed:

Samantha is still in the wooden playhouse. Harry, Syed, Darren and another boy are running around the outside of the yard. Jett and Oscar...are running around the yard and up and over various pieces of equipment (such as the blue and red slide). Tommy is now in the centre of the yard walking on a wooden crate and along some wooden planks, which are painted white. ... [Practitioners] Annie, Jessica and Ivy are in different parts of the yard, watching (in Ivy’s case) and talking to<sup>13</sup> (in Annie and Jessica’s case) different children. Abbie and Jane, who have a ball each, are standing behind me, giggling. Laurel kicks a ball over near me. (Sunnyland field-notes, 31-August-2010)

Darren, Harry and Syed are running around the outside of the garden. Ivy is encouraging the children to do an “assault course”, which consists of tyres, logs, a wooden pallet and a wooden balance beam to walk across, and a tunnel to go through. She has also placed four hula hoops in a line on the ground, along with some beanbags, in a different section of the garden. She cheers for Adam when he throws a beanbag into the furthest away hoop. Oscar has a blue bouncy ball and is trying to throw it into the higher of the two basketball nets, which is in the centre of the yard, just in front of where I am sitting. (Sunnyland field-notes, 5-October-2010)

After the summer, I noticed the practitioners playing more proactive roles in the garden; before the summer, they tended to stand back and watch the children, while after the summer, I observed them getting more involved in activities. In their interviews, the women explained that this change was due to the introduction of a new weekly role called the ‘developer’, which they took turns to fulfil. As is

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<sup>13</sup> I do not know what they were talking about, but there was no indication it was ‘physical education’ (e.g. Annie and Jessica did not appear to be encouraging children to engage in physical activities).

explained in more detail in Chapter Six, the developer's duties were to 'develop' the children's indoor experiences by carrying out observations, and to set up activities in the garden. Jean, the manager, drew on discourses related to 'structure and freedom' to explain that structured activities were 'necessary' because some children (particularly boys) regularly fought and hurt each other in the garden. Structured activities were 'needed' to counteract and regulate this 'bad' behaviour which occurred when children had too much freedom. Jean also explained that more structured outdoor activities were important because she felt that children needed help learning physical skills and activities. She explained that it was for these reasons that she introduced the developer role, and thus the adults became more involved in the children's 'physical education'.

As noted, the children also had opportunities for 'physical education' indoors; like the children are Cheery Faces, they participated in *Sticky Kids*. These activities took place in the nursery classroom. The following excerpt from my field-notes details one of the occasions I observed the participants engaging in *Sticky Kids*:

"Are you ready for some exercises?" [Jessica] asks. ... Jessica stands at the top of the group and leads them in clapping and stretching up into the air, as instructed by the CD. Jessica says, "Get those muscles working" and "Move those hips!" She mentions "muscles" on numerous occasions. She leads the children in following the instructions of the song; for example, swinging their arms, and stretching up tall. Ivy comes over and asks the children, "Who has big muscles?" She joins in with the actions too. (Sunnyland field-notes, 1-June-2010)

Seemingly reflecting Curriculum for Excellence's concerns with physical activity and health, Jessica's reference to "exercises", as well as her and Ivy's mentions of "muscles" and other body parts, constructs *Sticky Kids* as a means of working on the children's bodies. This emphasis on physical activity and health was also evident in the practitioners' talk about the focus of preschool 'physical education' more generally. Jessica, for instance, talked about the role of 'physical education' in preventing obesity. She evoked images of 'couch potatoes' (Gard & Wright, 2005) by expressing a concern with "all the publicity about obesity and children sitting in front of computers too often" (Jessica, Sunnyland). Annie too drew on physical

activity and health discourses when asked about the point or focus of preschool ‘physical education’:

...getting children to appreciate the different ways they can move, the ways they can move their bodies, use their bodies. ... Um...help them to understand the benefits of, sort of, health and exercise, you know, to keep themselves fit and healthy, and running about outside. (Annie, Sunnyland)

For Annie, ‘physical education’ is not just about providing children with the physical ‘tools’ to engage in a “fit and healthy” life; it is also about helping them gain an appreciation and understanding of the “benefits” of doing so. Annie’s comments seem to reflect some of the Curriculum for Excellence experiences and outcomes. They particularly align with the one concerned with children learning to “move”, “manage and control” their bodies (LTS, 2009c, p. 5) and the one stating that children should learn that “being active is a healthy way to be” (LTS, 2009c, p. 9).

Jean also talked about physical activity and health when asked about the focus of preschool ‘physical education’:

Keep them busy and keep all their muscles moving and keep them healthy. ... And use that energy that’s there and use it to benefit the child, rather than if they’ve got an awful lot of energy and they don’t use it to...or don’t get rid of it, then often they get themselves into trouble because they’re not using their energy in the right places... (Jean, Sunnyland)

Like her colleagues, Jean initially characterises physical activity as important in terms of health. She goes on to talk about its significance in terms of regulating children’s behaviour. This notion of the importance of physical activity in relation to behaviour was a regular theme in the practitioners’ interviews at Sunnyland – as well as at the other settings – and is discussed in more detail in Chapter Six.

A concern with physical activity and health was also evident in some of the children’s talk. As at the other settings, some children specifically spoke about exercise. It was during two observations that I first heard such references:

Lily is in the centre of the yard, near the tyres, doing jumping jacks. Jessica, who is standing near me, calls out, “What are you doing, Lily? Oh exercises!” Lily, still doing her jumping jacks, turns around to where Jessica and I are and says, “Exercises”. (Sunnyland field-notes, 15-June-2010)

Tristan comes over and asks, “Did you see me running?” I say, “I did. Do you like running?” He nods and says, “I like running to get exercise”. He and Bobby start running around the bench in a wide circle that involves them running around the tree and the wooden playhouse. Every time they get back around to where I am sitting, I say things like, “Oh wow, you two are such fast runners!” and “You couldn’t be back around that quick!” They appear to really enjoy when I say this; they smile and laugh and keep running around. At one point, when they briefly stop when they get back around to me again, Tristan tells me, “We’re Supermans”. He then turns to Bobby and says, “Let’s go, Bobby. Let’s run to get our exercise.” (Sunnyland field-notes, 21-September-2010)

On these occasions, the children did their ‘exercises’ unprompted by practitioners; although I encouraged Tristan and Bobby, ‘exercises’ were something they and Lily chose to do without adult direction. The week after the second observation detailed above, Tristan participated in his first interview. I showed him a photograph of the garden and asked him to talk about it:

TRISTAN: *[Pointing at the bench in the photograph]* You were sitting.

NOLLAIG: I was sitting there – you’re pointing to the bench, excellent. And what were you doing, can you remember?

TRISTAN: We were running and we were back again.

NOLLAIG: You were running. ... And can you remember, why were you running?

TRISTAN: ’Cause we got our exercise.

(Tristan, Sunnyland, interview)

Tristan talked about exercise on numerous occasions. When I asked him to tell me why he went to the garden, his response was “’Cause to get exercise” (Tristan, Sunnyland, interview). Throughout his interviews, he connected exercise to health and fitness. Abbie and Jane also repeatedly engaged with these notions. The following excerpt shows how they described exercise as physical activity that would help them stay healthy:



NOLLAIG: Do you ever do anything in the garden maybe that might help you stay healthy?  
 ABBIE: Em...no.  
 JANE: Exercise.  
 ABBIE: Yes, exercise.  
 NOLLAIG: Exercise? Okay, so what kind of things would you do for exercise in the garden?  
 ABBIE: Running.  
 JANE: Run, run.  
 NOLLAIG: And is that good? Is that good?  
 JANE: Yeah.  
 ABBIE: Yeah.  
 JANE: Yeah.  
 NOLLAIG: Yeah? Why is that good?  
 ABBIE: 'Cause... 'cause you be so healthy.  
 (Abbie and Jane, Sunnyland, interview)

Of the 18 children who participated in mind-mapping and interviews at Sunnyland, Abbie and Jane engaged with health and exercise discourses to the greatest extent. Other children negotiated these discourses in a different way, by engaging with them more briefly. This could perhaps have been because they did not consider that they actually did exercises at the nursery. For instance, when I asked Oscar if he did exercises in the garden, he said no, while Adrianna told me the “only” exercise she did in the garden was “running around” (Adrianna, Sunnyland, interview). It seemed that some of the children did not consider many of the activities they did in the garden to be exercise. Thus not many of them engaged with the notion of exercise in much depth. When I asked the children about health, many of them were more inclined to talk about food than physical activity. This was also the case with some of the children at the other settings. I discuss this in Chapter Seven.

Along with physical activity and health, other discourses emerged in the participants’ talk about ‘physical education’. For instance, I noted above that Jean spoke about the importance of children receiving adult guidance regarding motor skills. Motor skill development was something Jessica also talked about in relation to the focus of preschool ‘physical education’. She drew on developmental discourses when talking about younger preschoolers focusing on developing gross motor skills including climbing and running, and older ones concentrating more on developing fine motor skills such as holding pencils. As noted earlier, such age-related classifications are

problematic because they lead to comparisons and judgements (Burrows, 2004). Jessica, however, talked about the importance of these skills in terms of children's self-esteem, which she said "rockets when they can run and hop and...hold a pencil properly" (Jessica, Sunnyland). Naomi similarly said that preschool 'physical education' should focus on "building children's confidence in their own physical abilities" (Naomi, Sunnyland). Naomi said that this confidence was important because, without it, children would not enjoy 'physical education'. In a similar vein, Jessica said the most important thing about preschool 'physical education' was that it should be fun:

But most of the children love all the physical stuff, so as long as it's fun – the main thing would be that it was fun for them and it was interesting, you know, because if it's not, then they won't do it, you know. ... That's the main things for our age-range of children anyway, yeah. ... Something that they would want to do. (Jessica, Sunnyland)

Ivy agreed that it was important for 'physical education' to be fun. When asked about the focus of preschool 'physical education', she said, "I think it should just be fun physical exercise" (Ivy, Sunnyland). Her reference to "physical exercise" again seems to reflect Curriculum for Excellence's focus on physical activity and health. Rather than talking about motor skill development, Ivy talked about 'physical education' in terms of children being free and letting off steam. She said that, while she was happy to sometimes play games with the children, she felt that going to the garden should be "their time to be free really" (Ivy, Sunnyland).

Like Ivy, the children frequently drew on discourses related to play when asked about what they did in the garden. Their comments included:

...just playing with the balls and the basketballs and maybe the footballs.  
(Morgan, Sunnyland, mind-mapping)

...play on the cars. (Alfie, Sunnyland, mind-mapping)

I like to play with Alfie. (Kamil, Sunnyland, mind-mapping)

Playing with John. ... *Star Wars*. (Jackson, Sunnyland, mind-mapping)

I like playing in the climbing frame. (Abbie, Sunnyland, mind-mapping)

I like to play in the little house. (Tommy, Sunnyland, interview)

Well, I normally like to play on the slides. (Adrianna, Sunnyland, interview)

Playing 'hide and seek'. (Laurel, Sunnyland, interview)

These quotes show that, like the children at Oakdale and Cheery Faces, the children at Sunnyland talked about different types of play. Many of them spoke about physically active play and, like the children at the other settings, this was something they often talked about in relation to equipment. Their talk about both large (e.g. climbing frame) and smaller (e.g. balls, cars) equipment links physically active play to motor skill development. Jackson's reference to *Star Wars* indicates that the children engaged in imaginative play in the garden, while Kamil's and Jackson's quotes show the children referred to social play.

Most of the children's talk at Sunnyland related to play. Apart from *Sticky Kids* – which eight children briefly talked about – they made few references to adult-led activities. There were only four exceptions to this: Adrianna talked about adult-led parachute and hula hoop games; Laurel said the adults taught the children to catch and kick balls; and Abbie and Jane referred to 'playground' games ('what's the time, Mr. Wolf?' and 'duck, duck, goose'). Thus, like the children at Cheery Faces, the children at Sunnyland positioned outdoor 'physical education' as something that placed more emphasis on freedom and choices than on adult-led activities. Another similarity was that, like Ian and Bill at Cheery Faces, three children at Sunnyland (Alfie, Abbie and Adrianna) cited getting fresh air as the reason for going to the garden. As noted earlier, this was something all five practitioners at Sunnyland mentioned. The emphasis on getting fresh air characterises 'physical education' as a break from the indoor environment, while the strong focus on child-led activities positions outdoor 'physical education' as something that should not be too regulated or structured.

This section of the chapter has shown that discourses related to play, physical activity and health, and – to a lesser extent – motor skills underpinned ‘physical education’ at Sunnyland.

#### **5.4 Conclusion**

My discussion of ‘physical education’ at Oakdale, Cheery Faces and Sunnyland indicates that discourses related to motor skill development, play, physical activity and health, along with a related pedagogical discourse concerning ‘structure and freedom’, underpinned ‘physical education’ at the contexts. These discourses are also prevalent in Curriculum for Excellence and Early Moves. The discourses were often inter-linked. For instance, the practitioners’ talk about ‘structure and freedom’ regularly involved reference to play, motor skills and physical activity. There were also times, however, when discourses conflicted; the participants sometimes talked about ‘structure *versus* freedom’ rather than ‘structure *and* freedom’, with play positioned in opposition to more structured activities. The discourses also operated in different ways at the settings. For instance, motor skill and movement concept development was particularly prevalent at Oakdale, evident to a lesser degree at Cheery Faces, and less again at Sunnyland. These notions may have been evident to a lesser extent – or in a different way at least – at Cheery Faces and Sunnyland because the children at these settings did not experience structured physical education lessons.

The analysis in this chapter has revealed the operation of two broad categories of discourses related to preschool ‘physical education’ at the three settings. The first relates to developmental discourses, and includes those concerned with motor skill development and play. Chapter Six focuses on the participants’ engagements with these discourses. The second set of discourses features those concerned with physical activity and health. I interrogate the participants’ engagements with these discourses in Chapter Seven.

## **Chapter 6 – Developmental discourses underpinning ‘physical education’ at Oakdale, Cheery Faces and Sunnyland**

### **6.1 Introduction**

I noted in Chapter Two that developmental discourses are prevalent throughout the literature related to early childhood education generally, and more specifically preschool physical education. As discussed in Chapter Five, developmental discourses are also evident throughout Curriculum for Excellence, the Early Moves literature and the talk of the practitioners and children at Oakdale, Cheery Faces and Sunnyland. In this chapter, I further interrogate how the participants engaged with developmental discourses in order to construct their subjectivities. I particularly focus on three major discourses I identified during my analysis. I draw on Foucault’s work around power, referring in particular to the eight techniques of power outlined in Gore’s (1995) framework. Discourses operate through techniques of power in order to produce and constrain particular actions and practices (Evans & Davies, 2004b). Therefore, interrogating the participants’ talk for examples of techniques of power allows me to investigate how particular discursive ‘truths’ related to developmentalism operated at the preschools.

### **6.2 Participants’ talk related to developmentalism**

#### **6.2.1 Introduction**

Both the adults and children often talked about play and motor skill development, while a related pedagogical discourse concerning ‘structure and freedom’ also permeated their talk and their practice. From my observations and the interviews, two broad categories of ‘physical education’ were evident at the settings: unstructured, child-led experiences, and structured, adult-led activities. At Oakdale, the latter was what I observed most frequently, while at both Cheery Faces and Sunnyland, I most often observed the former. When asking the participants about preschool ‘physical education’, I emphasised that I was referring to all of these situations, which, as noted in Chapter Five, the adults variously called ‘physical play’, ‘physical activities’ and ‘physical exercise’. Three main discourses around the

notion of developmentalism emerged during analysis of the adults' interview data. These themes all relate to play and to the notion of 'structure and freedom'. The discourses are: 1) children learn and develop through play; 2) children should have choices and freedom; and 3) sometimes more structured activities are needed. These discourses were also evident in the children's data, although the children often engaged with them in different ways than the adults. I now discuss these three sets of discursive 'truths' and interrogate how the participants engaged with them.

### **6.2.2 Discourse 1: children learn and develop through play**

As discussed in Chapter Two, there is a wealth of literature concerned with play and its alleged link with learning and development during early childhood. Much of this literature is dependent on 'truths' associated with developmental psychology, which, despite critique from a range of research contexts, remain in a position of dominance in early childhood education (Ailwood, 2003a; Cannella, 2008; Fleer, 2003a; MacNaughton, 2005). The dominance of these 'truths' was reflected throughout the practitioners' interviews. They were in general agreement that play is a vital element of early childhood education, and all talked about it as a vehicle for learning and development. For instance, Jessica stated that children's "whole learning is through play" (Jessica, Sunnyland), while according to Ivy, being deeply involved in play is "the only way that a child will really, really learn" (Ivy, Sunnyland).

Amanda too emphasised the role of play in children's learning. When asked what play meant to her, she said:

It's children learning, developing, experimenting, trying new things through a range of different activities and media, but where their...their mind's engaged and quite often they're physically engaged and they're...they're taking steps forward. Like, they're learning new things. They're...through their experimenting and they're putting into practice as well things that they've seen happen in the world. The little bits of knowledge they have, they're trying to link together different bits of information that they've picked up, different things that they've learned, trying to fit them together to make things work or to invent a game or... It's massive; like, I don't really know if you can define play, can you? (Amanda, Oakdale)

Amanda's contention that play is difficult to define is supported by numerous researchers (e.g. Fein, 1981; Moyles, 2006; Powell, 2009). Her talk is underpinned by the developmental 'truth' that children learn by "experimenting" and exploring. In this way, it is reflective of Piaget's model of cognitive development, in which the child is positioned as a problem-solver who learns by activity and discovery (Burman, 2008). Many of the other practitioners also talked about children's learning in this way. Their comments, when asked about play, included:

...they are exploring themselves all the time and they're finding out, they're using their own mind. We're...you're not using my mind, I'm not telling them what to do, so they've got to use their own brain and work things out for themselves. (Jean, Sunnyland)

...everything's through play, absolutely everything is fun through play. ... You know, it's active learners – that's the key word. ... And if, you know, classic thing of why does the square not fit into the circle? That's learning through play. ... They explore it themselves. We don't say, "Well, that's a square and that's a circle and that's why..." They...they try and fit it in and they figure it out. ... It's all about figuring it out and working it out. ... Mmm, but they have to explore. ... If they don't explore themselves, they're not going to actually find out. (Ivy, Sunnyland)

Jean and Ivy engage in normalisation and exclusion (Gore, 1995) in these excerpts. Gore (1995) defines normalisation as "invoking, requiring, setting or conforming to a standard – defining the normal" (p. 171). Normalisation is evident in the above excerpts in the ways the women talk about what learning through play involves (e.g. exploring). They speak with certainty about what children "have to" do, thus characterising play as imperative for preschool children's learning and development. Exclusion, which Gore (1995) defines as "the reverse side of normalisation – the defining of the pathological" (p. 173), is evident in Jean's and Ivy's references to what learning through play does not involve (e.g. adults telling children what to do). Both women also engage in totalisation, which involves "the specification of collectivities, giving collective character" (Gore, 1995, p. 179). Totalisation is evident in the way the women talk about preschool children in collective terms, such as through their use of the word "they" and Ivy's reference to "active learners".

As noted in Chapter Two, Piaget's model foregrounds the notion of active learning. One of the 'Building the Curriculum'<sup>14</sup> documents in relation to Curriculum for Excellence is specifically entitled 'Active Learning in the Early Years' (Scottish Executive, 2007). It is perhaps not surprising then that Ivy was not the only practitioner to directly reference this concept; Serena, Alison, Stacey and Amanda did too. Other explicit references to Piagetian concepts include Annie's mentions of preschool children's egocentricity and their difficulty understanding abstract concepts. She engaged in normalisation, totalisation and classification (Gore, 1995) by maintaining that preschoolers are "egocentric...just because of their developmental stage" (Annie, Sunnyland) and speaking about "the concrete to abstract concepts that very young children find very difficult to understand, numbers, colours, that kind of stuff" (Annie, Sunnyland). Gore (1995) defines classification as "differentiating groups or individuals from one another" (p. 174). Classification thus involves what Foucault (1982) terms "dividing practices" (p. 777). Annie's comments reflect the concern in developmental psychology with 'dividing' or classifying children according to ages and stages (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007; Robinson & Jones Díaz, 2006).

The other practitioners frequently made statements that similarly referred to what preschool children 'could' and 'could not' (or 'should' and 'should not') do. For instance, Serena and Vanessa talked about preschool children's minds wandering and their potential to lose concentration, Sarah referred to preschoolers' physical abilities being "somewhat limited" (Sarah, Cheery Faces), Amanda said preschool children loved being active, and Jean referred to two boys who were "very tall for their age" (Jean, Sunnyland).

There were occasions when the children also made such statements, showing that they too engaged in classification (Gore, 1995). Erin, for instance, referred to some of the children at Oakdale as "wee ones" (Erin, Oakdale, interview), telling me she was one of the bigger children. Abbie similarly talked about helping "the little kids"

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<sup>14</sup> This is a series of publications concerned with planning for implementing Curriculum for Excellence and specifically with involving practitioners "in professional reflection, debate and rethinking" (Scottish Executive, 2006, p. 1).



(Abbie, Sunnyland, interview) by showing them how to line up to go outside. Tristan told me he was too little to use skipping ropes, but that he would use them when he was big like his sister. In a similar vein, Laurel said she would cycle when she was bigger. The children thus showed that they too positioned children (themselves and others) as ‘deficient’ and too young or ‘little’ to do particular things. As such, they appeared to position older people (e.g. practitioners, older children) as more competent and consequently more powerful than younger people (e.g. themselves).

These comments by both the adults and children show that developmental assumptions influence people’s views of what children can and cannot do at particular ages (Burrows, 2004). One effect of such assumptions was evident during an interview with Vanessa and Serena, in which they positioned preschool children as ‘too young’ for certain elements of Curriculum for Excellence. When asked about what the children experienced regarding health and wellbeing, aside from ‘physical education’, Vanessa and Serena mentioned healthy eating, emotional development and then issues related to sexual health and substance misuse:

- VANESSA: Eh...like the Curriculum for Excellence goes into, like, details like sexual health and things.  
SERENA: Yeah, of course.  
VANESSA: Which I think’s a bit...  
SERENA: A bit much.  
VANESSA: ...premature for this age, but that’s what’s in the curriculum, and also, like, substance misuse and...  
NOLLAIG: Right.  
VANESSA: But obviously that’s something we never really touch upon.  
SERENA: No.

(Vanessa and Serena, Cheery Faces)

In a later interview, when I asked them about the changeover to Curriculum for Excellence, they again criticised the inclusion of these topics on the grounds that they were unsuitable for preschool children:

- VANESSA: And because it’s for three- to 18-year-olds as well, I know it’s developed slightly but there’s stuff about, like, sexual health and things.  
SERENA: And substance abuse and stuff.

VANESSA: It's just not...it's just not necessary, I don't think for...

SERENA: No, not for...

VANESSA: ...three- to five-year-olds.

(Vanessa and Serena, Cheery Faces)

In these excerpts, Vanessa and Serena engage in classification and exclusion (Gore, 1995) to position preschoolers as too 'innocent' and 'vulnerable' to learn about issues related to sexuality and substance misuse. They claim that, although Curriculum for Excellence features experiences and outcomes related to these topics, they "never really touch upon" them; because children are deemed to be 'too young' for certain 'knowledge', they are denied it. By choosing not to provide children with 'knowledge' related to these areas, Serena and Vanessa demonstrate agency as practitioners. Their agency can be interpreted as either resisting the curricular guidance, or acting on its claim to be non-prescriptive in order to give practitioners "professional space" (LTS, 2009a, p. 3). It appears, however, that by enacting their own agency in this way, they may stifle that of the children, by positioning them as vulnerable and powerless.

While many of the practitioners' references to children's ages involved classification (Gore, 1995), in that they were concerned with differences between what preschoolers could or could not do compared with older children and adults, Rachel engaged with developmental discourses in a different way when I asked her about important things to consider if planning preschool physical education CPD courses or resources. While initially, Rachel mentioned preschoolers' potentially limited attention spans, she emphasised that this was not a taken-for-granted assumption for her:

And some of the children get...are so focused. ... It's just, I don't think there's much different; they're pretty capable at three-and-a-half, the children, really. It's just about making sure the level was appropriate, I suppose, and the challenge. (Rachel, Cheery Faces)

Rachel draws on developmental discourses in multiple ways here; although mentioning the importance of "making sure the level was appropriate", she talks about preschoolers' capabilities and maintains they are not greatly different from

older children. She went on to say that some preschool children could be “focused” and “competitive”. This assertion contrasts with prevailing assumptions related to preschoolers’ attention spans and abilities to concentrate. Rachel then, however, engaged in totalisation and classification (Gore, 1995) regarding differences between preschool children and older people by saying preschoolers always want to go outside, while practitioners sometimes prefer to stay indoors. Rachel’s multiple and sometimes contradictory engagements with developmental discourses reflect the poststructural view of subjectivity as fluid and conflicted, rather than unified or fixed (Weedon, 1997).

Stacey also engaged with developmental discourses in a contradictory way. When asked about the importance of play at preschools, she explained – like the other practitioners – that its significance was due to its link with learning. She positioned play as the most appropriate medium of learning for children of preschool age:

...if you start formal education too early, just, you know, the ones who haven’t yet developed in certain ways will just get left behind because it’s sort of a more rigid...even though we’ve got the Curriculum for Excellence, the education from P1’s quite rigid. You know, they start doing phonics and stuff in P1 and I just think, you know, if nursery was like that, I think it would just be awful! *[Laughs]* ... Some would get left behind. ... And, to be honest, you know, they’re too young for it. Well, I suppose, I know that’s just a cultural answer ’cause, you know, that’s the way we do it in Britain, but they are too young for it. They wouldn’t be able to sit for any length of time and...and I think it would bore them and put them off school, but I think the fact that they get to have play, sort of, in, you know, an educational environment and learn a little bit, learn some structured stuff, like, a little bit of structured stuff, but mostly play, I think that’s really good. (Stacey, Oakdale)

Stacey recognises that her contention that preschoolers are too young for formal, structured teaching is “a cultural answer”. In this way, she acknowledges that her ‘knowledge’ about play and learning is a cultural and social construction. However, she contradicts and resists this acknowledgement by talking about preschool children’s ‘abilities’ in essential, normalising terms (“they are too young”, “they wouldn’t be able”, “it would bore them”). She thus shows that, while recognising that these ‘truths’ are cultural and social constructions, she is deeply invested in

them. This perhaps reflects the pervasiveness of developmental discourses in Scottish preschool education.

All the practitioners aligned with the view that play has a role in learning and development. They talked about it as something children do almost all the time at preschool. For instance, when asked what play meant to her, Naomi said it was difficult to describe, but that:

It's one of those things that... I think every child should do it constantly really. It's what children do all the time really. ... No matter what they're doing, they're always, in their eyes, playing. ... Even if you're doing something where you think that you're learning them something really good, to them, it's just play. ... I think it's crucial in a child's development that they have that every day, to play. (Naomi, Sunnyland)

Naomi's talk shows how strongly she is invested in the idea that play is a vital element of children's preschool experiences. She engages in normalisation (Gore, 1995) by talking about play as something children "should do". She also engages in totalisation (Gore, 1995) by positioning preschool children in collective ways; play is something 'all' preschoolers engage in and all define in a similar way.

While Naomi claimed that children consider everything they do to be play, the talk of the children who participated in the study indicated that this was not the case. During the picture card sorting activity, in which I showed them a variety of pictures and asked them to select ones depicting people playing and not playing, the children displayed strong views regarding activities and situations they felt did not involve play. For instance, of the 25 children who examined and commented on all 12 pictures, 21 explicitly stated that a boy sitting at a desk (and apparently not doing anything) in one of the pictures was not playing. Similarly, 20 children said that an image of three children sitting on the floor while an adult apparently read them a book did not depict play, and 20 commented that children pictured watching others playing were not playing themselves. Since these images depicted situations the children were likely to experience on a frequent basis at preschool, it is clear that they did not – as Naomi maintained – think of everything they did at preschool as

play. The picture card sorting activity revealed that the children considered play to feature active engagement; they appeared to position being docile and passive during adult-led activities (such as story-time) as not playing.

Some data also revealed that, while the practitioners talked about play and learning as interconnected, the children tended not to do this; many of them clearly distinguished between play and learning. Some of the children, for instance, told me they engaged in play outdoors and learning indoors. For example, when I asked Colin if he ever learned anything in the playground, he said:

COLIN: No, we don't.  
NOLLAIG: You don't learn outside? Where do you learn?  
COLIN: Inside.  
NOLLAIG: Okay. So you don't learn outside, but you learn inside?  
COLIN: Yeah.  
...  
NOLLAIG: Okay, so what do you do out in the playground?  
COLIN: We play, just play.

(Colin, Oakdale, interview)

Abbie and Jane similarly talked about 'just playing' outside:

NOLLAIG: Can you tell me, do you ever learn things outside in the garden?  
ABBIE: Em...no.  
NOLLAIG: No?  
ABBIE: We don't learn things.  
NOLLAIG: No? Where do you learn things?  
ABBIE: Inside.  
NOLLAIG: Oh inside. So what do you do outside then?  
ABBIE: We run around.  
NOLLAIG: Oh right, you run around.  
JANE: And we play.  
ABBIE: Just run around, just run. ... Run around and play.

(Abbie and Jane, Sunnyland, interview)

Thirteen other children said they did not learn outside, similarly mentioning that they just played (e.g. Michelle, Cheery Faces), ran around (e.g. Aidan, Cheery Faces) and learned inside (e.g. Oscar, Sunnyland). The children's talk indicated that they

associated learning with indoor spaces. They positioned their time in the outdoor spaces as an opportunity for free play.

These examples show that the children and adults tended to talk about play in different ways. This finding aligns with the work of Carroll (2002) and Ceglowski (1997), which similarly found that children's and adults' views of play differed significantly. Similar to these studies, my findings indicate that while practitioners constructed play as related to learning and development, many children did not characterise it in this way.

### **6.2.3 Discourse 2: children should have choices and freedom**

The practitioners emphasised the importance of children having choices and freedom in their activities. This concern appeared to stem from their belief that children learn and develop through play. Choices and freedom were concepts many of the practitioners mentioned when asked about play. Serena and Vanessa, for instance, when asked what play meant to them, highlighted the notion of choice:

SERENA: I don't know, I just...I guess for just children to be happy and just doing something that they enjoy really.  
NOLLAIG: Okay.  
VANESSA: Yeah. Choosing what they want to do.  
(Serena and Vanessa, Cheery Faces)

Emphasising children's agency, Naomi similarly said that play "lets the children make up their own minds on things" and "gives them their own sense of independence" (Naomi, Sunnyland), while according to Stacey, "anything that they choose to do using the resources around them is play" (Stacey, Oakdale). Similar to Serena's references above to happiness and enjoyment, Jessica, Ivy and Annie at Sunnyland, along with Amanda at Oakdale, all talked about play in terms of fun. This is similar to how the children characterised it.

In the previous section, I discussed how the children positioned play and learning as separate entities; play involved running around and "having fun" (Ian, Cheery Faces, interview), while learning was different and usually took place indoors. Abbie

emphasised the value she placed on free play when I asked her if she would have liked to learn things out in the garden; she said she would not, because “it’s too boring listening to the teacher” (Abbie, Sunnyland, interview). By positioning learning as the result of “boring” adult-led activities, Abbie showed that having freedom in the garden was important to her.

I noted in Chapter Five that most of the children’s talk about ‘physical education’ (particularly at Cheery Faces and Sunnyland) centred on child-led free play. In this way, although the adults and children tended to talk about play in different ways, both groups showed that they valued the notion of children having choices and freedom. For instance, Vanessa and Serena, when asked about free play, expressed similar sentiments to those expressed above by Abbie:

- VANESSA: They get a bit fed up as well if it’s all really structured.  
SERENA: Because obviously we’ve got the day quite full and...  
VANESSA: Uh-huh, they wouldn’t have the freedom to do what they enjoy really.  
...  
SERENA: So in free play, we feel it is good just to get out there and just let them do whatever.  
NOLLAIG: Right.  
SERENA: And they need that time as well – you know what it’s like yourself having to follow the same routine all day.  
(Vanessa and Serena, Cheery Faces)

In this instance, Vanessa and Serena place free play in opposition to structured activities. Free play is positioned as allowing children to have choices, “freedom” and time to do what they “enjoy”. Structured activities, therefore, are characterised as restrictive and boring (“fed up”). Serena engages in normalisation (Gore, 1995) by saying “they need that time” and “you know what it’s like yourself”. These statements portray the strength of the discourse related to children’s choices and freedom; Serena takes it for granted that I understand what she is talking about. She appears to assume I agree with her viewpoint, thus illustrating how strongly she is invested in the ‘children should have choices and freedom’ discourse; she characterises it as natural and obvious (MacLure, 2003).

Serena and Vanessa acknowledged that there were times when they needed to step in, but stressed the importance of staying in the background during children's play:

- SERENA: I mean I feel I do sometimes take a step back, but maybe if I see that someone is just sitting around, I will try and encourage them to do something. But generally just supervising, isn't it?
- VANESSA: They don't want you to join in sometimes either.
- SERENA: Uh-huh.
- VANESSA: They're just like, nah.
- SERENA: Obviously if we're needed, then we will step in, but just, kind of, let them do what they want to do.
- VANESSA: And you don't want to make it, like, too structured either. Like, "Right, we're going to..."
- SERENA: Because there is a lot of structure throughout the day, so it is good for them just to choose what they want to do.
- VANESSA: Without an adult, like, interrupting and saying, "Do it this way".

(Serena and Vanessa, Cheery Faces)

By saying that sometimes the children do not want them to join in, Serena and Vanessa engage in classification and exclusion (Gore, 1995) and again foreground the importance of children having choices. They also again construct free play in opposition to structured activities. Serena's reference to "a lot of structure throughout the day" indicates that the children's time in the garden is their chance to be free and have a break from the more structured indoor environment; like the children, Serena and Vanessa appear to have different expectations regarding indoor and outdoor spaces. Their talk supports the research of Maynard, Waters and Clement (in press), who found that early childhood teachers allowed children more opportunities to engage in free play outdoors than indoors. Maynard *et al.* also report that practitioners had less rigid expectations regarding children's behaviour in the outdoor environment; outdoor spaces were positioned as arenas in which children had more freedom from adult control than in indoor spaces. Serena's and Vanessa's talk illustrates how an emphasis on children's choices and freedom influenced their pedagogical practices (in that it led them to primarily 'supervise' the children during play). The influence of these notions on the other practitioners' practices was also evident when I similarly asked them about their roles in 'physical education'.



While ‘physical education’ at all three settings featured – to varying degrees – both free play and more adult-led activities, the women were generally in agreement that their roles as preschool practitioners did not involve ‘teaching’ children in a formal, direct way. Tanya – the physical education teacher at Oakdale – explained that her role with the preschoolers was different from her role with older children:

I think in nursery there’s a lot more of, “Let’s go and try this” or “Here’s, kind of, the aim of...what I would like you to try and do is this – how are we going to do it?” and they come up with various different options of getting there and there’s not really...like, the primary children get to do that as well, but there’s...nursery, there’s not really rights and wrongs because a lot of it’s so generic. It just is, “Go and try it”. You know, “What can you think of? Let’s use our imagination and let’s try things.” Whereas in upper primary, say you’re playing a game, it has quite a specific goal, so everything has to work. You know, it’s a lot more guided learning. ... Whereas I think nursery...in fact, probably nursery’s more open-ended, that’s probably...the, kind of, word for it. (Tanya, Oakdale)

Tanya’s comments show that, although she led the lessons, she was conscious that preschoolers ‘should’ be taught in a way that featured more exploratory and “open-ended” activities than lessons with older children. Her reference to “rights and wrongs” appears to position physical education with older children as concerned with learning ‘correct’ skills and knowledge; she claims this is not the case with preschoolers, where the focus is on ‘trying’ and experimenting. Tanya told me she struggled with this pedagogical approach when she first taught preschool children. She said she initially “hated” and “dreaded” their lessons because she had no experience of preschool children or of early childhood education:

...I hated it. It was, like, I dreaded it because I just felt as if I didn’t know what to do with them. I felt...like, I wasn’t winging it because I had ideas of what I wanted to do, but I felt as if I was winging it and I didn’t know what to expect from the children and, like, the discipline and things, I didn’t know what was okay to let them do and what wasn’t and if they didn’t do what I asked them to do, I wasn’t really sure how to deal with it. ... I was just totally out of my comfort zone. You know, just completely, had never dealt with children that age, especially not a class full of them. Didn’t know what they were going to do on the equipment, didn’t know how they were going to react to me. Just totally out of my comfort zone, you know, is probably what it came down to. (Tanya, Oakdale)

Tanya's comments show the extent to which she valued developmental 'truths'. When she first started teaching preschoolers, she felt she lacked 'knowledge' about what they 'should' and 'should not' have been able to do. She found it difficult to adapt her teaching practices, assuming they were appropriate for older children (and thus inappropriate for younger children). By contrasting older and younger children in this way, Tanya engages in classification (Gore, 1995). Her perceived lack of 'knowledge' led to feelings of insecurity and worry. Her specific reference to not knowing what to do regarding discipline indicates that discipline is an important element of her job as a physical education teacher. Tanya thus positions physical education as a means of regulating children; there is an expectation that children should do as they are told. Tanya worried that preschoolers would not be 'able' to take instruction in the same way as older children, and so felt confused and perhaps less in control than she was accustomed to being during lessons with older children. She went on to explain that, in order to overcome these difficulties, she spent time in the nursery getting to know the children, and that she subsequently came to enjoy teaching preschool physical education.

Tanya was not the only practitioner to talk of pedagogical dilemmas related to 'physical education' for preschoolers. For some of the women, their privileging of choices and freedom clashed with the very notion of 'physical education'. As noted in Chapter Five, they tended not to use the term 'physical education', as they generally considered it to be a concept more associated with schools than preschools. Contrary to the notions of choices and freedom, many of them positioned 'physical education' as something more structured than what children would (or 'should') experience at preschool. I speculated in Chapter Five that the 'problem' with the term 'physical education' at preschools may be the word 'education', and noted that the talk of Jessica (Sunnyland) and Alison (Oakdale) explicitly supported this idea.

Jessica expressed the view that the word 'education' signified something more structured or formal than she, as a preschool practitioner, was comfortable with. When she told me 'physical education' was not a term used at Sunnyland, I asked if that meant it was not generally used in preschool education:

JESSICA: No, no, it's more 'physical development'.  
 NOLLAIG: Right.  
 JESSICA: You're more thinking about the child's development, rather than, you know, the other side of things. Em...you're more thinking about what...em...their skills.  
 NOLLAIG: Okay.  
 JESSICA: You know...em...we talk about 'gross motor skills' and 'fine motor skills' basically in nurseries.  
 NOLLAIG: Yeah.  
 JESSICA: Em...but yeah, no, it's not really...I know in schools it's classed as 'PE'.  
 NOLLAIG: Yeah.  
 JESSICA: When I was at school, it was classed at 'PE'.  
 NOLLAIG: Uh-huh.  
 JESSICA: But no, normally we tend to just call it 'physical development' when we're talking about the child.

(Jessica, Sunnyland)

I noted in Chapter Five that, while Curriculum for Excellence refers to 'physical education' in relation to preschool children, the previous preschool curriculum (LTS, 2004) refers to 'physical development and movement'. Jessica's talk seems to indicate that either she has not taken account of this change, or she is actively resisting it. She constructs a binary between 'development' and 'education', referring to education as "the other side of things". She talks about development in terms of gross and fine motor skills, seeming – through her 'development' versus 'education' binary – to imply that these skills are something children 'develop' rather than 'learn'. She elaborated on this when asked if she felt 'physical education' was a term more associated with schools than preschools:

JESSICA: Well, I think so. I think in schools, they do focus more on the education side.  
 NOLLAIG: Right.  
 JESSICA: Whereas we focus on developing skills.  
 NOLLAIG: Okay.  
 JESSICA: You know, their balance and their coordination and...em...we focus more on that, which you're doing in schools too, but...em...it's more, you know, it's more an education establishment, I suppose.  
 NOLLAIG: Okay.  
 JESSICA: Well, I think...I just think nurseries tend to be a bit more relaxed about it, it's not so structured.  
 NOLLAIG: Right, okay.

- JESSICA: Like everything else, it's a development. You know, when they're in nursery, it's a bit more relaxed and a bit more free-flowing and when they get older, it gets more structured and you're playing an actual game.
- NOLLAIG: Okay.
- JESSICA: You know, and there's rules to it and...whereas in nursery, yeah, there's some rules, but there's not...
- NOLLAIG: Okay, so it's maybe that it's a bit more, kind of, open and, like you said, a bit more free, kind of, free and stuff like that?
- JESSICA: Yeah.

(Jessica, Sunnyland)

This excerpt illustrates that, to Jessica, 'physical education' is something more structured and regulated than what children experience at nursery. 'Physical education' is constructed in opposition to preschool education, which she describes as "relaxed" and "free-flowing". Her description of schools as educational establishments appears to imply that she does not consider preschools in the same way; schools focus on 'education' while preschools focus on 'development'. To further probe what she meant by this differentiation between 'development' and 'education', I asked Jessica if she felt motor skills were something children needed to be taught or needed freedom and opportunities to develop by themselves:

Most of them will choose to do these things if they're given...if they're given the opportunities 'cause there's not many children that won't go on a tricycle given the chance or go on a scooter or a space hopper or things, but, you know, so generally they will choose that, but it's providing the opportunities for it. ... Yeah, I think it's...I personally think it's...it's being given the opportunity, and some children will need encouragement if they've not been used to outdoor play or energetic things. Some will, because simply they've just not been encouraged to do it or they've not had the opportunities and they're not used to it. But generally, I'd say most of ours would try it, give it a go. (Jessica, Sunnyland)

Jessica engages in normalisation and totalisation (Gore, 1995) throughout this excerpt. In her view, "most" children do not need to be taught motor skills; they need opportunities to develop them by themselves. She engages in classification and exclusion (Gore, 1995) to propose, however, that children who have been deprived of opportunities or encouragement may need assistance and guidance from

practitioners; she implies that ‘normally’ this is not the case, as “most” children do not require such interventions.

To Jessica, ‘education’ appeared to conjure up images of regulated situations in which children had little freedom and few choices. ‘Development’ was a word she was more comfortable with. She talked about ‘development’ in relation to providing children with opportunities to play and thus to develop physical skills. Indeed, she told me she used the terms “physical play”, “motor skills” and “physical development” (Jessica, Sunnyland) rather than ‘physical education’. This again appears to show that her language in relation to ‘physical education’ reflected the previous preschool curriculum, rather than Curriculum for Excellence.

Alison was similarly uncomfortable with the use of the term ‘physical education’ in relation to preschool children. When I asked her and Dawn if they felt ‘physical education’ was a term used at preschools, Alison – like Jessica – positioned the word ‘education’ as problematic:

- ALISON:     *[To Dawn]* I think it’s probably [more associated with] older children, is it not?  
DAWN:       Yeah. *[Whispering, as if thinking out loud]* Going to ‘PE’, going to ‘gym’.  
ALISON:     The whole ‘education’ word.  
DAWN:       I think we just say ‘gym’. *[To Alison]* Yeah.  
ALISON:     Where it’s all meant to kind of be play and stuff in nursery, so putting the word ‘education’ into it might be a bit...! *[Laughs]*  
NOLLAIG:    Okay, because it’s maybe...that maybe sounds a bit more structured than what it is?  
ALISON:     Yeah.  
NOLLAIG:    Is that what you mean?  
ALISON:     Yeah, I think so. I think for them and...for children, it would just be, like...at that age, I think it would just go over their heads.  
DAWN:       Yeah.

(Alison and Dawn, Oakdale)

Alison draws on developmental assumptions about preschool children by suggesting that they would not understand the term ‘physical education’. She engages in classification (Gore, 1995) by differentiating between preschoolers and older

children in this way. As was the case with Jessica, the word ‘education’ troubles Alison. She constructs a binary between preschool education, which focuses on play, and school, which is concerned with education. It again appears that the ‘problem’ with the term ‘physical education’ at preschools lies with the word ‘education’.

Jessica’s and Alison’s talk supports the work of Moyles *et al.* (2002b) and Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2002), which suggests that some early childhood practitioners may be uncomfortable with words like ‘teaching’, as they consider themselves to be ‘facilitators’ rather than ‘teachers’. The talk of many of the other practitioners also supports this scholarship, since they too were uncomfortable with the term ‘physical education’, on the grounds that it evoked images of something more structured or ‘formal’ than they felt was appropriate for preschool children. The idea of structured, formal teaching situations was incompatible with the women’s concern with giving children choices and freedom in their activities.

Because the practitioners considered play to be a vital feature of early childhood education, and choices and freedom to be important elements of play, these concepts influenced their talk and their practice. They spoke about the importance of being “completely willing to do whatever the children’s interests are” (Amanda, Oakdale), and trying not to step into their play unless invited. According to Annie, it was important, when the children were in the garden, to “just let them go, let them have some fun” (Annie, Sunnyland). Many of the practitioners were in agreement that their roles in ‘physical education’ were generally to observe and supervise.

Comments included:

It’s really observing a lot more outside than joining in really, unless they want you to. (Dawn, Oakdale)

...it’s also watching the health and safety aspect, just to make sure they’re following the directions Tanya has said to them... (Alison, Oakdale)

...generally it’s just supervising and putting out the different activities for them and changing things around. (Jessica, Sunnyland)

More observing – you, kind of, observe their play because you don’t want them to play any, like, fighting games or anything like that. (Naomi, Sunnyland)

During my observations (when I was engaging in surveillance myself), I saw the women playing these supervisory, observational roles. The following excerpts from my field-notes provide examples of such occasions:

As the children walk around, Tanya tells them that she is watching the ways that they are changing directions as they move. (Oakdale field-notes, Wednesday 5-May-2010)

Eleanor and a boy whose name I don’t know are at the swings. Eleanor is spinning around and around on hers. Serena is by the wall, watching her. “You’re making *me* dizzy, Eleanor!” she says. (Cheery Faces field-notes, Thursday 24-June-2010)

I noted in Chapter Two that it appears to be taken for granted that observation is a vital early childhood pedagogical practice. The emphasis the practitioners placed on observation backs up this assertion, and shows that surveillance (Gore, 1995) was a technique of power that was particularly evident at the preschools. The children’s comments support this finding. They were aware that the practitioners ‘watched’ them closely. This was evident in their responses when asked what the adults did during ‘physical education’. Comments included:

They just...they just watch the kids do it. (Colin, Oakdale, interview)

Watch us. ... They just watch us. (Rosie, Oakdale, interview)

They just look around. (Taylor, Cheery Faces, mind-mapping)

Eh...just watch. (Michelle, Cheery Faces, interview)

They’re watching out for naughty people. (Jane, Sunnyland, mind-mapping)

...sit on the bench and if somebody does something not good, like kicks somebody in the face, the teachers tell them, “Off to the bench”. (Abbie, Sunnyland, interview)

Both the adults' and children's comments show that, while the women may have had benevolent intentions (e.g. ensuring children's safety), surveillance was a key means of regulating the children (Ailwood, 2003a) and assessing whether they conformed to particular standards (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007). The practitioners therefore enacted disciplinary power in a way that aligns with how Foucault (1991c) contends that it operates – through “hierarchical observation, [and] normalizing judgment [sic]” (p. 188). For instance, Alison's, Naomi's, Jane's and Abbie's comments above show how surveillance was a technology of regulation; practitioners watched the children to ensure they behaved in a certain way. The children were aware that being “naughty” would have repercussions if witnessed by practitioners; evoking images of Bentham's conceptualisation of the panopticon (Foucault, 1991e), adult surveillance served as a means of encouraging children to self-regulate regarding their behaviour. Furthermore, the practitioners' many comments about assessing children's skills showed how surveillance operated as a means of classifying them according to certain standards (and thus passing normalising judgements). For instance, Jessica talked about observing the children in the garden in order to assess their running, hopping, skipping, balancing and ball skills. She said these assessments were necessary because practitioners were required to write about them in children's individual profiles. This notion of assessing skills appears to contradict the idea, discussed earlier, that preschool education is open-ended and not concerned with “rights and wrongs” (Tanya, Oakdale).

Many of the practitioners made similar comments to Jessica. They talked about their pedagogical practices being based upon these observations, which they claimed enabled them to ascertain what children's ‘needs’ were. Sarah, for example, talked about the importance of observing children and then being “responsive” to their ‘needs’:

...if we're doing things like we've noticed a child's struggling to do a balance beam and then we'll focus more on balancing that week or we'll focus more on, you know, if somebody wants to do the monkey bars, so we'll focus on trying to get along the monkey bars or doing activities that'll build their confidence to be able to do that as well. ... Yeah, it's a lot of observation as well, like responsive planning and stuff like that. (Sarah, Cheery Faces)



While Sarah's and Jessica's examples relate to physical skills, Serena and Vanessa gave the examples of noticing that particular children had 'needs' related to concentration and sharing:

- SERENA: ...I'd taken my group out a while ago and it was...someone's concentration wasn't that great, so it was to try and focus on concentrating in physical play. So it could be anything that's relating to a child's...maybe one of their needs that they need to try and work on, type of thing.
- VANESSA: And I think last week...there's a little boy in my group that's, like, not sharing and, like, working together with his friends and so we went out and all worked together to build something with the waffle bricks.
- NOLLAIG: Okay.
- VANESSA: That was, like, the aim, sort of thing.
- SERENA: So it doesn't always have to relate to, like, physical play; it could be something like listening or team-building, type thing.  
(Serena and Vanessa, Cheery Faces)

These references to 'child-led' planning and practice are based on the idea that children's 'needs' can be determined by adult surveillance and classification (Gore, 1995). Thus, while 'child-led practice' was a notion the women frequently alluded to, this concept did not always mean children had choices or freedom, as 'child-led' often meant 'what adults consider children to need or want'. This disparity illustrates how, although the 'children should have choices and freedom' discourse emerged strongly in the women's talk, it shifted and emerged in different ways; sometimes choices and freedom were constructed as important for children, but at other times, the adults deemed it important for children to experience activities that were 'necessary' for their development. As such, sometimes children's choices and freedom were restricted. Serena, Vanessa and Sarah gave the example of sometimes limiting the children's opportunities to go on tricycles. They explained that, for a certain amount of time every day, they removed the tricycles from the outdoor area, as otherwise the children "would just be on the trikes and they wouldn't be doing anything else" (Vanessa, Cheery Faces). This example indicates that while all three women spoke about valuing children's opportunities for choices and freedom, they also engaged in exclusion (Gore, 1995) by regularly restricting children's

opportunities to experience these notions. Consequently, choices and freedom were not something the children at Cheery Faces always had during ‘physical education’.

The practitioners at Oakdale and Sunnyland similarly talked about sometimes ‘needing’ to restrict children’s choices and freedom. This notion leads me to the third discourse related to developmentalism that I identified during analysis – ‘sometimes more structured activities are needed’.

#### **6.2.4 Discourse 3: sometimes more structured activities are needed**

The practitioners agreed that, despite their concern with children having choices and freedom, there were times when more structured activities were needed. Some of the women expressed this view more strongly than others. For instance, at Cheery Faces, Sarah and Rachel emphasised the importance of children experiencing adult-led physical activities as well as free play more strongly than Serena and Vanessa did. Rachel spoke about why she felt structured ‘physical education’ was important when asked about her reasons for organising the Early Moves course for the staff:

...I do see the benefit of...of teaching [preschool physical education] because some people would veer away from it and think, “I can’t do it” even at a young age of three or four, they think, “I can’t do it” and...whereas if everybody’s trying then they do see they can achieve a bit more. (Rachel, Cheery Faces)

Rachel explained that adult-led activities were a means of providing children with opportunities they might avoid if always allowed to engage in free play and therefore to choose what to do. She thus critically engaged with the notion of free play and recognised that it is not the only means of learning in early childhood. Sarah similarly discussed the benefits of adult-led ‘physical education’ for children who might otherwise choose not to participate:

SARAH: I think when it is structured, their concentration seems to be a bit more and they, like, they last a lot longer and it also, it builds their self-esteem as well, which I find also has a lot to do with how well they do in the activity.

NOLLAIG: Okay.

- SARAH: Because I have two children in my group who, one of them really struggles with physical activities, really does, doesn't like to do them at all. Just there, we were going to go and do *Sticky Kids*, "Oh I hate *Sticky Kids* and it makes me tired, it makes me..."
- NOLLAIG: Right.
- SARAH: So that...it's...when we do our structured group, it's kind of like, "Yeah, come on, let's go, let's do it" and, you know, and I'll join in and, "Let's do it together. I'll hold your hand while we do it, we'll do it together", you know, and that sort of thing. And that helps, because if it's free play, he wouldn't do it.
- NOLLAIG: Right, yeah.
- SARAH: We've got another child who absolutely thrives on positive...like, she loves people saying, "Oh you're doing so well" and that makes her do so much better and she could go on and as long as somebody's saying, "Yeah, you're doing good", she'll keep going because she knows that she's doing well, you know.
- NOLLAIG: Yeah.
- SARAH: And it does help, it really does, because maybe when we're doing our free play that they might be the ones that sit quietly in the corner with the books or they're the ones that just go up and down the slide, up and down, down the slide, you know.  
(Sarah, Cheery Faces)

This excerpt reflects Ailwood's (2003b) observation that studies have shown that play in early childhood settings can be repetitive, isolating and recreational rather than educational. Sarah – like Rachel – demonstrates that she does not "romanticise" play (Wood, 2007b, p. 312) or view it "through rose-tinted glasses" (Wood & Attfield, 1996, p. 93). When I asked Sarah about her role in the children's more structured 'physical education', her talk reflected the proactive, leading role I observed her taking. She described herself as "the ringmaster" (Sarah, Cheery Faces), a role that involved allowing children to have choices, but sometimes adopting a more direct pedagogical style in which she instructed them. Thus, the 'children should have choices and freedom' and 'sometimes more structured activities are needed' discourses came together in Sarah's talk. She illustrated her reliance on developmental 'truths' related to children's ages by engaging in classification (Gore, 1995) when explaining that the role she played was influenced by whether the children were 'older' or 'younger' preschoolers. She said her role in the children's outdoor play varied, "depending on the age-group" (Sarah, Cheery

Faces). Sarah told me ‘older’ preschoolers (who would soon be starting school) often preferred to play independently of her, while the ‘younger’ children tended to like when she took part in their activities. Her talk illustrated that, while she valued children’s choices and freedom, she also saw the need to play a more proactive role at times, in order to organise more structured activities when children needed “that wee bit of extra support” (Sarah, Cheery Faces). Sarah thus showed that her pedagogy was fluid and adaptable (Scottish Executive, 2005), rather than static or fixed.

The ‘children should have choices and freedom’ and ‘sometimes more structured activities are needed’ discourses also intersected in many of the other practitioners’ talk. Serena and Vanessa, for instance, spoke about children having choices and freedom *within* structured activities. They gave the example of allowing the children to choose which movements to engage in during the adult-led space bubble activity. Naomi similarly mentioned the notion of “structured play” (Naomi, Sunnyland), which she said involved directing children towards particular open-ended, exploratory activities.

Amanda strongly expressed the view that play at preschool should be structured. Showing her investment in the ‘children learn and develop through play’ discourse, she stressed that her role as an educator was to take children’s learning forward:

...my personal opinion is that it [play] needs to be structured, it needs to be guided, because children have that kind of free sense of, like, being unrestricted in play, like, you know, how a child would describe play; just, like, having fun and being engaged, you know – children can have that in a structured...in an environment that has been previously designed and set out, I think. But if you just left a child in a room with a sand tray, there’s only so much they can learn by themselves. You need adults to structure their play and to add things to it and to take it forward because a child’s not going to make those steps by themselves, they need some...they need a stimulus to take their next steps in their learning and that’s what...that’s what you’re there for as an adult in the nursery. (Amanda, Oakdale)

Like Rachel and Sarah, Amanda does not romanticise play here; she acknowledges that not all play leads to learning. This excerpt also depicts the power relations

inherent in play at preschools. While children may feel “free” and “unrestricted” in their activities, practitioners utilise techniques of power (e.g. exclusion and distribution (Gore, 1995)) in order to structure the environment in such a way as to produce and constrain particular experiences and actions (Evans & Davies, 2004b). Such pedagogical practices reflect the Foucaultian conceptualisation of power as operating in a capillary-like fashion (Hall, 2001), rather than being top-down and repressive (Foucault, 1991a). They also support Foucault’s contention that power can be productive. If – as Amanda maintains – by structuring children’s play in a particular way, they learn, develop and have fun, power can be seen to produce pleasure and knowledge (Foucault, 1991a; 1991b).

Stacey aligned with Amanda’s assertion that it was vital for preschool practitioners to be concerned with taking children’s learning forward. She said she sometimes found the emphasis on children’s choices and freedom in early childhood education frustrating, as she felt there were occasions when children ‘needed’ more direct guidance. Echoing Tanya’s descriptions of her initial struggles with teaching preschool physical education, Stacey spoke about how difficult she found the transition from teaching older children to teaching preschoolers. She described the role of the nursery teacher as “a whole different job” (Stacey, Oakdale), as it involved more open-ended planning than teaching older children did:

...it’s, sort of, like, I plan the activities, but the children choose, so the children are a lot more in control of their own learning. ... Which is good sometimes, but sometimes it’s frustrating because, you know, the children who just like to do art might choose to stay in and never go outside and they never learn things. ... And I’m like, you know, I want to make them come outside and force them to learn it because it’s going to help them in the long run, you know, to learn this skill now. So sometimes I do find that a bit frustrating. (Stacey, Oakdale)

Stacey’s comments support the literature that proposes that notions such as play and child-centredness – while often unquestioningly promoted in the early childhood education field – can be problematic in practice (e.g. Burman, 2008; Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007; Wood, 2007b). Similar to Rachel and Sarah (see p. 200-201), Stacey contends that sometimes free play is ‘not enough’, as children may be deprived of particular

experiences if they choose not to engage in them. She positions certain learning as 'imperative' for children's future lives, showing that she is concerned not only with children's current subject positions, but with those they will take up in future.

Not all the practitioners spoke about the 'necessity' of structured activities with the same degree of conviction as Rachel, Sarah, Amanda and Stacey. For instance, Naomi and Ivy both spoke strongly in defence of free play. Naomi said she did not like children's 'physical education' to be too adult-led, because it was "too much sometimes for some of them" (Naomi, Sunnyland). She explained that children needed freedom from adult control in order to express themselves during free play. In a similar vein, Ivy spoke of the importance of children learning 'naturally'. She talked about structured activities disrupting this process:

...sometimes it's so hard – it's like when you're doing group-time, particularly with my group, you're sitting them down, you've stopped them from what they're naturally doing, they're naturally playing with, you're then going to something that's adult-led, that they're going, "Right, hold on, what am I doing?" It takes them so long to focus on that, that they really don't understand it sometimes 'cause they're kind of...their attention was with what they were just doing. (Ivy, Sunnyland)

For Ivy, free play is a 'normal' and 'natural' activity for children to engage in; adult-led activities are therefore positioned as 'abnormal' and 'unnatural'. She engages in totalisation and exclusion (Gore, 1995) in this excerpt, by talking in terms of all preschoolers struggling with the notion of structured activities since such practices are not 'normal' for them.

Alison, Dawn, Serena, Vanessa and Jessica were also inclined to speak more strongly in favour of free play than adult-led activities. In this way, a pattern emerged in relation to the women's views and the positions they held at the preschools. I noticed that, with the exceptions of Sarah and Annie, the women who were either managers or qualified teachers (i.e. Rachel, Jean, Amanda, Tanya and Stacey) spoke more strongly about the importance of adult-led activities than those who were nursery nurses (i.e. Alison, Serena, Vanessa, Jessica, Naomi and Ivy) or in Dawn's case, a learning assistant. While all the women agreed that there were times when structured

activities were justified, it seemed that those who were more highly qualified and/or in more powerful positions at the settings were more comfortable with the notion of sometimes ‘teaching’ rather than solely ‘facilitating’. This disparity was particularly evident in Jean’s talk about introducing a new weekly role for the practitioners at Sunnyland.

As mentioned in Chapter Five, the staff at Sunnyland played more proactive roles in the garden when they introduced a new role called the ‘developer’. When fieldwork began, Jessica, Naomi, Ivy and Annie played one of four roles each week in the nursery; they took turns of being in charge of snacks, art, story-time and (indoor) activities. When the new academic year began in August, the ‘activities’ role was replaced with the role of ‘developer’. The practitioners told me there were two aspects to this role, concerning indoor duties and outdoor duties. Jean explained that indoors, it was the developer’s role to engage in surveillance (Gore, 1995) in order to “see what’s going on, see which activities are being used, and then put in writing – so we can all see – what has worked and what hasn’t worked” (Jean, Sunnyland). As a result of these observations, it was thought that the developer could contribute to planning and come to the aid of practitioners or children who needed help. Jean said her rationale for introducing this indoor aspect of the developer role was to encourage the other practitioners to be less reliant on her:

...what my goal for the girls [practitioners] is, is to try and get them to manage the room themselves, without needing me up there. ... You know, yes, I’ll put my...give them ideas and whatever, but they need to learn ’cause say I did leave, they would struggle up there without me giving them ideas. So they need to see it for themselves, so now every fourth week, they do see it for themselves. They get a chance to stand back and say, “Okay”. (Jean, Sunnyland)

Jean positions Jessica, Naomi, Annie and Ivy as dependent on her in relation to ideas about managing the nursery. She engages in classification (Gore, 1995) by categorising managers and nursery nurses as two separate groups. In this way, she illustrates her position of power over the other four women; Jean engages in surveillance of the practitioners, while they engage in surveillance of the children. Thus, “hierarchical observation” (Foucault, 1991c, p. 188) is an instrument of

disciplinary power not just between adults and children, but amongst the manager and the other practitioners. Jean used this power to introduce the developer role in order to encourage the other practitioners to be more proactive and involved in the running of the nursery.

Jean's rationale for the outdoor aspect of the developer role again showed how she utilised her power in order to produce and constrain particular actions and practices (Evans & Davies, 2004b). She told me it was the developer's duty to set up activities in the garden. Her justification for introducing structured activities to the children's time outdoors was twofold. One reason related to the practitioners. Jean again engaged in classification (Gore, 1995) to explain why Jessica, Naomi, Annie and Ivy 'needed' to take on more proactive roles in the garden:

...it's good for staff as well, keep them motivated, 'cause they think, "Oh it's not just going down to the garden and standing and watching the children play". It's going down to the garden and getting involved with the children and if you don't give...don't lead them, staff will stand about. It doesn't matter who they are, they're not going to go and run around the garden unless they really feel they have to. ... So when they've got a structured thing like that, they've got to take part. (Jean, Sunnyland)

Along with classification, Jean engages in totalisation (Gore, 1995) here by saying that 'all' practitioners will just "stand about" unless they are compelled to be more involved in children's activities. She differentiates her own practices as manager from the practices of other practitioners; managers and other staff are again constructed as two distinct groups. Jean's engagement in these 'dividing practices' (Foucault, 1982) again illustrates how techniques of power in preschool 'physical education' are not just evident in relationships between adults and children, but in relationships amongst different members of staff. Interestingly, Rachel (the manager of Cheery Faces) talked in a similar way to Jean; she told me that in recent years, she had encouraged the practitioners at Cheery Faces to plan and lead more structured outdoor physical activities, as she was not happy to see staff "just standing with their hands in their pockets" (Rachel, Cheery Faces). This shows that both of the preschool managers who participated in the study were concerned with practitioners



actively ‘teaching’ children, rather than just ‘facilitating’ (or watching) their learning and development.

Jean elaborated on why she wanted the staff to focus on ‘teaching’ in the garden. She explained that children needed help with physical skills and activities:

Even just down to the skills of being able to catch a ball. It’s...if you just keep throwing balls at children and letting them lie around, they’ll play with them, but they never actually get the skill of catching the ball, because they need an adult to do it with them. ... And then once they’ve seen an adult do it, then they’ll try it together, but you’ve got to show them that. They can’t...you know, I think some people think they’ll just think this up themselves – they won’t, they have to be shown it. (Jean, Sunnyland)

Jean emphasises that ‘sometimes more structured activities are needed’. She talks about children ‘needing’ adult instruction, thus positioning them as ‘deficient’. Jean again engages in classification (Gore, 1995) by referring to people who think children learn skills without guidance. In this way, she privileges her own viewpoint by differentiating it from the views of these other people.

Jean’s second reason for introducing the outdoor aspect of the developer role related more directly to the children than the practitioners. She told me some of the boys constantly fought during outdoor play, so more structured activities were ‘necessary’ in order to eliminate this ‘bad’ behaviour:

...the boys were fighting constantly. ... So giving them free play was fine, but they were hurting each other, so now we’ve got it more structured, just for a while, ’til we see how it goes and then we’ll change it back again to more free play. But it may have to stay as structured because they really were hurting each other. (Jean, Sunnyland)

In this excerpt, Jean engages in ‘dividing practices’ (Foucault, 1982) regarding boys and girls, and good and bad behaviour. Classification and exclusion (Gore, 1995) work to position structured activities as ‘necessary’; too much freedom meant some children were fighting and hurting each other. Jean thus constructs the structured ‘physical education’ the children consequently experienced as a technique of

regulation. The outdoor space – despite often being characterised by the practitioners as an environment in which children could be free – was a regulated space with regulated bodies; certain behaviours were deemed ‘inappropriate’ and therefore had to be eliminated through adult intervention in children’s activities.

While, as noted, Jean discussed a number of reasons for the introduction of the developer’s outdoor duties, it was this concern with regulating children’s ‘bad behaviour’ that Jessica, Naomi, Annie and Ivy primarily talked about when asked about the developer role. The women explained that because some of the older boys tended to engage in rough and tumble-type play, which often led to them getting hurt, it was necessary to “rein them in a wee bit, give them a bit of focus” (Ivy, Sunnyland). All five practitioners at Sunnyland were in agreement that the developer role seemed, so far, to have been serving its purpose in this regard. As Naomi explained:

...we’ve seen a big improvement in the behaviour in the garden. ... They’re not as...as...running about pushing each other and hitting each other as they were before. It’s really helped to calm them all down a bit. ... So it’s much better. (Naomi, Sunnyland)

Regulating children’s behaviour was a reason also cited by Vanessa and Serena at Cheery Faces when discussing why structured activities were sometimes justified. Echoing the sentiments of the practitioners at Sunnyland, Vanessa and Serena explained that too much free play could lead to children being “wild” (Vanessa, Cheery Faces) and “running about crazy” (Serena, Cheery Faces). They thus positioned structured activities as a means of helping children focus and calm down. ‘Good’ children were characterised as calm and focused – perhaps docile and easier for adults to control.

The practitioners gave a variety of justifications for structured ‘physical education’. For some, children needed guidance in order to learn and develop in ‘physical education’. For others, structured ‘physical education’ was less about children’s learning and development than about regulating their behaviour. Like the

practitioners, the children engaged with the notion of adult-led activities in different ways.

As noted, much of the children's talk about 'physical education' (particularly at Cheery Faces and Sunnyland) focused on free play, illustrating the value they placed on having choices and freedom. Children at all three settings also referred to adult-led activities. This was particularly the case at Oakdale, where the children experienced a weekly physical education lesson. The children at Cheery Faces talked about structured physical activities to a lesser extent, while those at Sunnyland made very few unprompted references to adult-led 'physical education'.

I noted in Chapter Five that some of the children at Oakdale mentioned play when asked about their physical education lessons. The children's talk also showed, however, that they recognised that the lessons were adult-led and structured. When asked what Tanya did during the lessons, their responses included:

She teaches us about doing stuff. (Ashleigh, Oakdale, mind-mapping)

Mmm...tells us what to do with the things that are out. (Beth, Oakdale, mind-mapping)

Teach us what to do. (Joanna, Oakdale, interview)

She tells us the things what we are going to do. (Lisa, Oakdale, interview)

It's her job to...to help the kids know what they're going to do. ... She makes us balance. (Colin, Oakdale, interview)

The children were in general agreement that Tanya's role was to teach, show and tell them what to do. Supporting the adults' talk and my observations, the children described how the other practitioners played supervisory, supportive roles that primarily involved watching what the children did. The children described the practitioners' roles in the playground in similar terms, noting that sometimes they joined in with activities such as rolling the "big ball" (Rosie, Oakdale, interview).

While, as discussed, some of the practitioners expressed reticence about adult-led ‘physical education’ for preschoolers, the children at Oakdale spoke positively about their lessons. They did not appear to consider that they ‘clashed’ with or ‘disrupted’ the pedagogical practices they experienced in the nursery classroom or the playground; the adult-led approach did not seem to be problematic for them. This is perhaps because the structured activities they experienced featured elements of play, and therefore choices and freedom. I noted earlier that Tanya aimed to provide the children with open-ended, exploratory activities that aligned with what she felt preschoolers ‘should’ experience. In this way, she illustrated that she was concerned with both children’s choices and freedom, and the importance of more structured activities. The two discourses intersected in her interviews and her practice. Colin’s talk also showed how these discourses enmeshed in the physical education lessons. Having told me it was Tanya’s job to tell the children what to do, he described how this did not necessarily mean she gave prescriptive instructions:

COLIN: ...she helps us do whatever we wanted to do.  
 NOLLAIG: Oh right, she helps you do whatever you want to do?  
 COLIN: Yeah.  
 NOLLAIG: Cool, and so can you pick what you want to do in there?  
 COLIN: Yeah.  
 NOLLAIG: Or does she tell you?  
 COLIN: She tells me.  
 NOLLAIG: Okay, and sometimes do you get to pick as well?  
 COLIN: Yeah.

(Colin, Oakdale, interview)

I noted earlier how Serena, Vanessa and Sarah similarly talked about enmeshing notions of choices and freedom into the more structured ‘physical education’ the children at Cheery Faces experienced. While most of the children’s talk at Cheery Faces centred on free play, they made some references to adult-led activities. The children generally described the adults’ roles in their ‘physical education’ as supervisory. As noted earlier, some of them commented that the practitioners watched them. Other comments included: “They just look after you” (David, Cheery Faces, mind-mapping) and “they just ask the people if they’ve been naughty” (Bill, Cheery Faces, interview). David’s comment perhaps shows that some of the children positioned themselves as deficient and in need of adult help, while Bill indicates he

was aware his behaviour was under adult surveillance. Both boys' uses of the word "just" appear to imply that the adults did not play direct, proactive roles in their 'physical education'. While some children told me the adults sometimes played with them, the children at Cheery Faces – unlike those at Oakdale – did not use words like 'teach' when describing what the practitioners did during 'physical education'.

Like the children at Oakdale, however, the children at Cheery Faces generally spoke positively about their more structured 'physical education'. For instance, Bill, Eleanor and Michelle told me they enjoyed *Sticky Kids*, Ben and Michelle spoke about teacher-led 'playground games' they liked, and Taylor, Aidan and Eleanor said they enjoyed the space bubble activity. Some of the children spoke more critically about the space bubble activity, however. Dan and David said they usually liked it, but sometimes felt they did it too often, while Bill told me he sometimes found it boring. Chuck said he did not enjoy it because it made him "run out of the breath – all the breath comes out" (Chuck, Cheery Faces, interview). During my observations, I noticed that Chuck appeared not to like participating in adult-led physical activities. On four occasions, I saw that when the practitioners led activities, he opted not to join in. The following excerpt from my field-notes details an occasion when Sarah set up a ball game:

Only one child – Chuck – doesn't come over to join in. ... Vanessa tries to encourage Chuck to join in, but he does not want to; he is on the other side of the yard standing on some waffle blocks. ... Chuck comes over and sits down near Vanessa. He watches the game, but doesn't appear to have any interest in joining in. (Cheery Faces field-notes, Thursday 15-April-2010)

The other children tended to enthusiastically participate in both adult-led and child-led activities. In general, like the children at Oakdale, the children at Cheery Faces appeared to enjoy both types of 'physical education'.

Structured 'physical education' was not something the children at Sunnyland spoke about in much depth, even after the summer, when the practitioners started to play more proactive roles in their outdoor activities. While the children's references to structured 'physical education' were generally positive (e.g. Abbie, Nina, Adrianna

and Laurel told me they enjoyed *Sticky Kids*), they positioned outdoor ‘physical education’ as something that placed more emphasis on freedom and choices than on adult-led activities.

Similar to the children at Cheery Faces, the children at Sunnyland told me the practitioners watched them, looked after them and made sure they did not misbehave. For instance, Oscar told me that “if you’re bashing somebody, then they get you into trouble” (Oscar, Sunnyland, mind-mapping), while Shona said, “They help me if I get hurt” (Shona, Sunnyland, interview). Many responses also indicated that the children interpreted the practitioners’ behaviours as not only not proactive, but as passive or even disinterested in their ‘physical education’. Six children told me – sometimes repeatedly – that, in the garden, the practitioners stood together chatting. Abbie in particular made this point a number of times. The following excerpt is from an interview that took place in the garden:

NOLLAIG: And when you’re outside in the garden, what do the teachers do?

ABBIE: Em...they just talk and talk and talk.

NOLLAIG: They just talk and talk and talk?

*[Abbie points over to where Naomi, Jessica and Annie are standing together and talking]*

ABBIE: Look what they’re...look what they are doing.

(Abbie, Sunnyland, interview)

Abbie engages in totalisation and surveillance (Gore, 1995) in this excerpt to both tell and show me what the practitioners did in the garden. While some children said the adults sometimes played with them, the children at Sunnyland – like those at Cheery Faces – did not use words like ‘teach’ when describing what the practitioners did during ‘physical education’. The children characterised the practitioners as more passive than proactive in their outdoor activities. Indeed, most of my observational data and the children’s talk showed that child-led play was what the children experienced most often in ‘physical education’ at Sunnyland, although since the introduction of the new ‘developer’ role, structured activities started to feature more often. It seems from the children’s talk, however, that they did not interpret these activities as necessarily very adult-led. Their talk indicated – similar to the children’s

data at Oakdale and Cheery Faces – that structured activities may have still involved plenty of choices and freedom. This yet again shows that the ‘children should have choices and freedom’ and ‘sometimes more structured activities are needed’ discourses were often closely intertwined and taken up in an intersecting way.

### **6.3 Discussion and conclusion**

The participants’ talk reflected the pervasiveness of developmental discourses in both early childhood education literature, and documentation related to Curriculum for Excellence and Early Moves. The practitioners were heavily invested in developmental ‘truths’ about how preschool children learn and develop. While they sometimes engaged with these ‘truths’ in different ways, they were generally in agreement that play is a vital element of preschool education, and that consequently, children should be provided with opportunities for exploration and making choices.

Investment in these developmental discourses meant observation was positioned as an essential pedagogical practice at the preschools. While the practitioners may have considered that this meant they were providing children with freedom from adult control, an alternative reading is that they were engaging in surveillance (Gore, 1995). By judging children’s ‘needs’ based on this surveillance, observations can be re-interpreted as a technology of regulation (Ailwood, 2003a) and a technology of normalisation (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007). The children’s talk showed that they were aware the practitioners were ‘watching’ them and, for instance, looking out for incidences of misbehaviour.

While the practitioners positioned play as a vehicle for learning and development, the children did not talk about it in this way. The children also had definite ideas about what constituted play and what did not; their talk clearly indicated that they did not consider certain preschool activities (e.g. story-time) to be play. The adults, on the other hand, tended to talk about play in terms of it being an element of everything the children did at preschool. This was particularly evident in their talk about structuring play. This practice involved utilising techniques of power in order to lead children in a particular direction. For instance, practitioners may have engaged in classification

(Gore, 1995) by setting up particular situations or tasks based on children's ages, or distribution (Gore, 1995) by providing children with particular spaces for their activities. In this way, while children may have felt like they were 'free', the environment was set up in such a way as to produce particular outcomes. The practitioners' talk thus illustrated that they exercised power in a way that reflected Foucault's (1991a) assertion that it can be productive.

The practitioners also talked about sometimes 'needing' to more explicitly restrict children's opportunities for choices and freedom and provide them with more adult-led activities. They talked about this in different ways; some of the women were very much in favour of such activities at certain times, while others were less comfortable with them. The women who were qualified as nursery nurses tended to speak more strongly in defence of free play. Ivy gave an indication of why this might have been when talking about her initial training. I had asked her if she had experienced anything related to 'physical education' while training as a nursery practitioner:

...no, we didn't do an awful lot. I think a lot of it – it's maybe changing now but – a lot of it's...initially it's like, "The children go out to play. End of story." ... "And they'll sort themselves out." ... "End of story." And you have different levels of play equipment that they can use and you have slides and you have steps, so that they're using different areas of muscle development for that and that's the kind of end of it. I think that's how it's seen; it's like, "The children go out to play in the garden. That's the end of it." ... Because a lot of younger children naturally will hop, they will jump, they will skip, they will crawl – they will do all these things and it's only I think when they get older, they then have to be encouraged to do that. (Ivy, Sunnyland)

This excerpt shows that the notion that children learn and develop through play was strongly normalised in the course Ivy completed to qualify as an early childhood practitioner. The final sentence shows the extent to which Ivy has invested in this discourse. She engages in classification (Gore, 1995) by categorising younger and older children as two distinct groups, and normalisation (Gore, 1995) when talking about what children "naturally" do. In doing so, she privileges a view that works to exclude and marginalise those children who may not develop these skills without assistance, or by the time they are a particular age.



Ivy's comments position 'physical education' as unnecessary for preschoolers, as in her view, most children naturally physically educate themselves. Throughout her interviews, Ivy indicated that she was more in favour of providing children with opportunities for free play than with adult-led physical activities. It seems from the above quotation that this belief may, in some part at least, have stemmed from her initial training. The other participants who were qualified as nursery nurses similarly said that their courses had featured little or no content related to 'physical education'. It seems plausible that this may be why I detected the pattern that the participants who were nursery nurses generally appeared to be less in favour of adult-led activities than those who were either qualified teachers or managers.

The three discourses discussed in this chapter were closely interconnected in the participants' talk and practice. The notion that play is the most appropriate means of learning and development for children of preschool age underpinned the 'children should have choices and freedom' discourse. This second discourse operated both in conjunction and in competition with the third discourse, 'sometimes more structured activities are needed'. Sometimes, the participants talked about 'physical education' involving elements of both structure and freedom. At other times, they positioned these notions as clashing, with some practitioners expressing frustration regarding how to appropriately combine them.

This chapter has shown that the participating practitioners and children engaged with notions related to developmentalism in multiple ways. Their talk showed the strength of developmental 'truths' at the three settings. Drawing on Foucault's work around power, particularly through reference to Gore's (1995) framework, has allowed me to investigate how these 'truths' operated. All eight techniques of power outlined in the framework were evident throughout the data. Surveillance was particularly evident in practice, while normalisation, exclusion, totalisation and classification were prevalent in the participants' talk.

In Chapter Seven, I draw on Foucault's technologies of the self to interrogate the ways in which the participants engaged with physical activity and health discourses.

The technologies of the self provide a means of moving beyond a deterministic view of discourses to an understanding that the participants were not merely passive recipients of preschool ‘physical education’ discourses, but were actively, consciously involved in ‘taking them up’.

## **Chapter 7 – Physical activity and health discourses underpinning ‘physical education’ at Oakdale, Cheery Faces and Sunnyland**

### **7.1 Introduction**

As noted in Chapter Two, schools, and particularly physical education lessons, are increasingly positioned as important sites for the promotion of healthy lifestyles (Cale & Harris, in press; Gard, 2004b). It seems likely that with the increasing number of epidemiological studies seeking to increase physical activity participation amongst young children in order to prevent obesity and ‘unhealthiness’, preschools are – or will be – similarly positioned as sites of intervention. This seems particularly likely in Scotland, since the physical education curricular guidelines pertaining to children aged from three years old upwards are housed within health and wellbeing in Curriculum for Excellence. As shown in Chapter Five, discourses related to physical activity and health are prevalent in this documentation. As discussed, these discourses were also prevalent in the talk of the practitioners and children at Oakdale, Cheery Faces and Sunnyland.

In this chapter, I further interrogate how the participants engaged with discourses related to physical activity and health in order to construct their subjectivities. I focus first on the adults, before examining the children’s talk. In both cases, I initially provide a general overview of how the participants talked about physical activity and health. I then focus on a smaller number of participants, in order to more thoroughly interrogate the ways in which they engaged with these discourses. To do this, I draw on Foucault’s concept of the technologies of the self, which are practices individuals engage in to take up (or resist) particular imperatives in order to construct their subjectivities (Wright *et al.*, 2006). Technologies of the self thus provide a means of conceptualising individuals as actively involved in constituting their subjectivities (Foucault, 2000c) by choosing to invest in certain discourses over others (Atencio & Wright, 2009).

## **7.2 Adults' engagements with physical activity and health discourses**

### **7.2.1 Overview of adults' talk about physical activity and health**

Many of the practitioners spoke about 'physical education' in ways that reflected Curriculum for Excellence's foregrounding of physical activity and health discourses. For instance, some of them – Amanda (Oakdale), Jean (Sunnyland), Jessica (Sunnyland) and Sarah (Cheery Faces) in particular – positioned physical activity as important in relation to physical health and obesity prevention. When I asked Sarah, for example, about the focus of preschool 'physical education' at Cheery Faces, she initially talked about motor skill development, but then said:

And I think it's also important as well because there's such a big focus just now all about obesity in children as well and, you know, you can see the children that are already starting to get lazy at this age because they haven't been pushed to do the sort of...not pushed – that's not the right word – but, like, encouraged, or haven't enjoyed something that they've done and that's put them off. (Sarah, Cheery Faces)

Sarah's talk appears to reflect Curriculum for Excellence's concern with encouraging children to be physically active in order to prevent obesity (LTS, 2009c). She constitutes herself as an "ethical subject" (Foucault, 1992, p. 26) of these physical activity and health discourses by referring to children who are "already starting to get lazy at this age"; by making this moral judgement about particular children (Gard, 2008), Sarah implies that obesity is preventable through choosing to engage in certain practices. By positioning laziness as the cause of obesity, she conjures up images of 'couch potatoes', thus characterising obesity as a "story of sloth and gluttony" (Gard & Wright, 2005, p. 6). She talks about a lack of encouragement as a reason for this 'laziness', thus resisting notions that young children are 'naturally' physically active (e.g. Moyles, 2006) or the most physically active members of society (e.g. Bailey, 1999). Sarah characterises physical activity as a means of working on children's bodies in order to prevent obesity. Her talk indicates that she chose to provide children with encouragement regarding physical activity practices in order to transform them from being lazy to being active.

Some of the practitioners also positioned physical activity as important for health and wellbeing more widely than just in terms of physical health. In this way, the “ethical substance” (Foucault, 1992, p. 26) of physical activity was not solely people’s selves in corporeal terms. The chance to get fresh air and run around was something the practitioners at Sunnyland in particular spoke about. Ivy, for instance, talked about both children and adults experiencing a “rush” when engaging in physical activity:

...I mean, you know it yourself, even as an adult, you have to get, I personally have to get out because exercise is a way to kind of lift the spirits, it’s a way to kind of, like, have a different aspect to your life, it’s...you need opposites sometimes and it’s like today, it’s a very, very cold, icy, snowy day, but we have to get the children out. ... But it just means that they’re going to get fresh air. They’re going to get a different aspect than sitting in the nursery, being confined in a relatively small space and just have the kind of, like, that rush of moving their body about, which they need. (Ivy, Sunnyland)

Ivy positions the indoor space as restrictive and “confined”, where children have little option but to be sedentary. She characterises the chance to go outside and run around as imperative for both children and adults, in order for them to feel uplifted. Vanessa and Serena similarly talked about both children and adults feeling “cooped up” to the point that “you’re tearing your hair out” (Vanessa, Cheery Faces) and “just need to go outside” (Serena, Cheery Faces).

I noticed that when I asked the practitioners at all three settings about the place of physical activity in their own lives, they were inclined to talk about it – like Ivy, Vanessa and Serena – regarding health and wellbeing more widely than just in terms of physical health. For instance, Jessica (Sunnyland) talked about regularly doing yoga and *Zumba* classes, along with walking her dog, because these activities helped her to de-stress. Similarly, for Stacey, physical activity had both physical and more holistic benefits. While the “telos” or goal of her “ethical work” (Foucault, 1992, p. 27) was to be physically ‘healthy’ throughout her life, this work had other benefits too:

You know, I hit 30 this year, so I'm, sort of, like, thinking about the future and I do want to stay healthy and, you know, in terms of reducing things that could go wrong, but also I see it as, sort of, more as me time now. Like, I'll go swimming and it's great because it's like therapy. I'm exercising, but it's just like all of the, like, stress of the day just, like, goes – it's great. And Pilates is great because it's...em...it's very calming as well...em...but it still, you know, works out your body, which is really good as well. (Stacey, Oakdale)

Dawn – echoing Stacey's reference to “me time” – said physical activity made her feel “healthier”, “fresher” and “like you've done something for yourself” (Dawn, Oakdale). She expressed regret that, because of having two jobs, she did not have enough time to engage in physical activity as often as she would have liked. Vanessa and Serena similarly talked about finding it hard to find time for physical activity because of working long hours. Unlike Dawn, however, these women positioned physical activity as something they *should* engage in, rather than something they necessarily *wanted* to engage in:

VANESSA: ...like, it is, it's like, “Oh no, I have to go to the gym” but once I'm there, I enjoy it.  
 NOLLAIG: Yeah.  
 SERENA: I did go to the gym and I do think it's important, but at the minute I'm not really doing anything. *[Laughs]*  
 NOLLAIG: Right, and why? Is that, like, time-wise or...?  
 SERENA: Just too tired after work and can't be bothered really.  
 VANESSA: Uh-huh.  
 SERENA: I think it's the same – once you're there, it's fine, it's just finding the motivation to...  
 NOLLAIG: Yeah.  
 SERENA: But I'm going to start going back with [another staff member], so hopefully next time that I speak to you I'll be at the gym!  
*[Serena and Vanessa laugh]*

(Vanessa and Serena, Cheery Faces)

Vanessa indicates that she engages in technologies of the self including self-monitoring (Foucault, 1992) and self-regulation (Rose, 1989, cited in Besley, 2005) regarding physical activity; even though she sometimes does not feel like doing it, she feels she ‘has to’. Thus, while her reference to feeling compelled to participate in physical activity illustrates the strength of the discourse that positions physical activity as imperative, Vanessa chooses to engage in it because its outcomes bring

her pleasure (e.g. enjoyment). While Serena admits that she currently does not engage in any formal physical activity, the fact that she laughs after saying this and says that the next time she sees me, she will be going to the gym, could indicate that she too feels she ‘should’ be engaging in it. It could also indicate that she feels *I* – as a physical education researcher – think she should be doing more physical activity. She may feel embarrassed about ‘confessing’ (Foucault, 1993b) that she does not engage in it, and therefore compelled to tell me she will soon be doing more. These examples of guilt and embarrassment illustrate the power of physical activity discourses, despite Vanessa’s and Serena’s descriptions of how they sometimes resist them.

As well as positioning physical activity – both at the preschools and in their own lives – in terms of both physical health and health and wellbeing more widely, another way the practitioners talked about physical activity was in terms of regulating the children’s behaviour. The comments above by Ivy, Serena and Vanessa about children being ‘cooped up’ and ‘needing’ to go outside and run around relate to this theme. Vanessa and Serena were in agreement that physical activity was important because “it lets off steam” (Vanessa, Cheery Faces). They talked about children’s opportunities for physical activity as a means of counteracting what they regarded as misbehaviour. Ironically, this ‘misbehaviour’ seemed to involve physical activity; Serena and Vanessa described it in terms of children being full of energy, “desperate to run around”, “wild” (Vanessa, Cheery Faces) and “crazy” (Serena, Cheery Faces). The two women therefore constructed ‘physical activity’ as something that needs to be regulated and limited; ‘physical activity’ should only take place at particular times and in particular places.

Many of the other practitioners – including Ivy, Jean, Jessica, Naomi, Stacey, Alison and Dawn – similarly talked about the importance of physical activity for giving children a chance to ‘let off steam’ so they would not be badly behaved as a result of having “excess energy” (Ivy, Sunnyland). They therefore talked about the “energy-in/energy-out” balance (Gard & Wright, 2005, p. 38) not just in relation to weight and health, but in terms of children’s behaviour. According to Jessica, without the

opportunity for physical activity, children “get fidgety, they’ve got energy to burn and they don’t know what to do with it” (Jessica, Sunnyland). The chance to engage in physical activity, therefore, was constructed not just as important in terms of children’s health, but as a device which “calms them, takes the energy out of them” (Naomi, Sunnyland). As such, it seemed that sometimes the practitioners chose to provide the children with opportunities for physical activity in order to make their jobs easier; if children did not have chances to engage in physical activity, practitioners’ abilities to do their jobs well were compromised as children were more difficult to manage. Thus, on some occasions, children’s opportunities for physical activity may have been more for the adults’ benefit than the children’s.

So far, I have provided a general discussion of how all the practitioners talked about physical activity and health. I now more thoroughly analyse how two of them – Amanda (Oakdale) and Jean (Sunnyland) – engaged with these discourses. I have chosen to discuss the talk of these women in particular, firstly, because they engaged with these topics in depth, and secondly, because of the similarities and differences in their discussions. Both women positioned ‘physical education’ and physical activity as important for preschool children. They both talked about physical activity in relation to health and specifically obesity prevention. Amanda in particular spoke about this at length, while Jean also spoke about health in relation to safety, injury and risk. Unlike Amanda, Jean talked about physical activity in relation to children’s behaviour. The women also had different experiences of physical activity in their own lives, and different reasons for engaging in it.

### **7.2.2 Amanda**

Amanda was the nursery teacher at Oakdale when fieldwork began. She was in her twenties and had qualified as a primary school teacher in 2007. Before that, she had completed a degree in outdoor education with environmental science. She started teaching at Oakdale in 2007. The following year, she became the nursery teacher, a post she held for two years. From August 2010, she taught a class of older children (seven- and eight-year-olds) at the school. Perhaps not surprisingly, given that her initial degree was in outdoor education, Amanda was passionate about physical



activity. In the year between doing this degree and returning to university to qualify as a primary school teacher, she worked at an outdoor education centre, something she had done as a summer job since she was 16. Amanda had also played badminton at international level, was qualified as a badminton coach, and ran after school badminton and athletics clubs for children in the upper primary classes at Oakdale.

When asked about the place of physical activity in her life, Amanda told me she participated in it on an almost daily basis: every week, she engaged in *Zumba* classes, badminton, tennis, aqua aerobics and exercise classes. She was also a competitive runner (e.g. participating in ten kilometre races) and said that when she was unable to run because of a recurring knee injury, she would do cycling, yoga and Pilates instead. Amanda also said that at weekends, she and her husband engaged in activities such as climbing and walking.

Amanda explained that she engaged in physical activity for numerous reasons:

...I really, really enjoy it. I get a lot out of it. I just like the buzz of, like, exercising. To keep...like, to keep in shape as well, I suppose. ... Like, I would...I would...I would...I'd be really upset if I was overweight. Like, I'd find that really hard to deal with. ... And because I've just got really...like, I've just always had it in my family and it just is normal and it's something in...I would much rather be out, like, out going on a walk with my family than, like, watching TV with them, if you know what I mean. ... Like, it just...like, I don't know, I think it's just kind of ingrained. (Amanda, Oakdale)

I noted earlier that many of the practitioners, when asked about the place of physical activity in their own lives, talked about it in terms of health and wellbeing more widely than physical health. At the beginning of the above excerpt, Amanda similarly talks about physical activity in terms of enjoyment and experiencing a “buzz”. She then, however, connects the notions of physical activity and weight by talking about the importance of staying “in shape” and avoiding being overweight. In this way, she positions physical activity as a means of working on her body; physical activity practices are part of the ‘ethical work’ (Foucault, 1992) she engages in to stay “in shape”. Her desire to work on her body in this way illustrates her investment

in healthism and in discourses which position the slim body as ideal (Azzarito & Solmon, 2006). Her reference to the upset she would feel if she was overweight may indicate that she is disgusted by and/or fearful of fat (Burrows & Wright, 2007); she positions the overweight body as ‘other’ in relation to the physically active, worked body. It is unfortunate that I did not follow up this line of talk by asking Amanda further questions about why being overweight would be so upsetting for her. The discussion presented above took place towards the end of Amanda’s final interview (so there was no subsequent interview in which I could have asked more questions), and immediately after mentioning her ‘fear’ of becoming overweight, her talk turned to the influence of her family and upbringing. Amanda spoke about this on numerous occasions. By describing physical activity as “ingrained”, she positions it as a ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ element of her life. Amanda told me that, from a very young age, her parents took her hill-walking, rock-climbing and kayaking. Elliot *et al.* (in press) cite the work of Lawson (1983a) to suggest that early learning experiences influence the ways in which teachers come to conceptualise what physical education is about and should involve. It thus seems likely that Amanda’s early experiences of physical activity will have impacted on the way she engaged with discourses related to ‘physical education’.

Indeed, a commitment to and enthusiasm for physical activity pervaded Amanda’s talk about ‘physical education’ at Oakdale. She was clearly passionate about physical activity not just as an important element of her own life, but as something the children she taught should participate in too. While Amanda engaged with the notion of physical activity in different ways when talking about why it was important for the children at Oakdale, she primarily constructed it as significant in relation to their health; she told me it was important because “there’s lots of children in this school who eat appallingly and don’t exercise” (Amanda, Oakdale). She positioned physical activity as a means of working on children’s bodies in order to prevent ‘unhealthiness’; she clearly bought into the “mode of subjection” (Foucault, 1992, p. 27) – the rules and ‘truths’ – associated with healthism. I noted in Chapter Five that when asked about the point or focus of preschool physical education, Amanda spoke about helping children recognise they could be physically active in many different

ways. She also emphasised the importance of raising their heart-rates, so they could keep “fit and healthy” (Amanda, Oakdale). She told me she wanted the children to enjoy physical education and physical activity so they would continue to participate in it and thus ‘avoid’ issues like obesity:

I want the children in my class to love PE. ... Like, I want them to really enjoy it, because you see all these, like, issues with obesity and that sort of thing, and I had children when [before becoming the nursery teacher] I was teaching in Primary Five...there were children in that class already, who, like, couldn't think of anything worse than going to PE and they would come up with every excuse under the sun not to be there, and I thought, if I can try and make it fun for them, then maybe, you know, if I can try and...you know, if they're already like that when they're eight years old, you know, they're already hating PE, then what, kind of...what hope have they got, you know? (Amanda, Oakdale)

Amanda's emphasis on the importance of enjoyment appears to align with Curriculum for Excellence's positioning of “joy” and “positive attitudes” as the “foundation” for future participation in physical activity (LTS, 2009b, p. 6). By connecting physical education with obesity, Amanda illustrates her concern with physical activity in relation to health. Health, fitness and exercise were concepts I heard her discussing with the preschool children on three occasions. Her interviews revealed why she engaged the children in these discussions.

According to Amanda, the staff at Oakdale considered teaching the children about health to be an important aspect of their jobs. She told me this was a concern at the school prior to the introduction of Curriculum for Excellence. Amanda explained that because the school is located in an area deemed to be of low SES, it was important for teachers to take responsibility for educating children about health, as many of them were unlikely to learn about it outside of school:

...it's a school where children, in my opinion and the opinion of most of the staff I think, if you ask them, don't have access to positive role models in terms of health, healthy lives, in their own home. ... But I think health is really important because there's so many children here who just, like, really don't have a great idea about what's healthy and what's not. Like I said, no-one at home really showing them, not really many opportunities to be involved in activities where you'd learn about healthy eating or being active

and that sort of thing. ... And I think in a community like this the school has a lot of responsibility to push that sort of ethos forward because the children aren't getting it at home or in the local community. (Amanda, Oakdale)

Amanda's talk supports Vander Schee and Boyles's (2010) contention that health interventions are often uncritically viewed as 'necessary' forms of salvation. She adopts a particular technology of the self to constitute herself as an 'ethical subject' (Foucault, 1992) of healthism. The technique she adopts is 'othering', whereby she refers to the practices of other people in order to differentiate and classify her own practices (O'Flynn, 2004). 'Othering' is evident in Amanda's contrasting of the 'positive role models' children encounter at school (i.e. teachers including herself) with either absent or negative role models outside of school (i.e. parents, family members and others in the community). Her 'othering' has the effect of positioning her own practices in relation to children's health as 'better' than those of people the children encounter outside school. Amanda again positions herself as an 'ethical subject' (Foucault, 1992) of healthism by explicitly saying that she believes it is important for children to learn about 'healthy' practices in relation to eating and "being active". Amanda elaborated on why these 'healthy' practices were important by again engaging in 'othering':

...we've got a lot of problems with children in our school who don't eat healthily, they don't...they're not provided with healthy meals at home, they're not...they're coming into school with a packed lunchbox with...it's got a *Mars* bar and a packet of crisps and a can of *Coke* and that's their lunch, you know, as provided by their parent. ... And so I've got children in my class and there's children throughout the school who are really overweight and they, you know, they can't even sit on the carpet with their legs crossed. It's, you know, it's really...it's really sad and so I think more than ever, it's striking me how important it is to get them interested in being physically active in the nursery... (Amanda, Oakdale)

Amanda's 'othering' again positions her own beliefs and practices regarding health as 'right' and other people's as 'wrong'. As well as 'othering' parents who provide children with 'bad' food, Amanda 'others' overweight children who are unable to cross their legs when sitting on the floor. Positioning these children as devoid of particular physical abilities because of being overweight, she does not question the regulatory technique that requires them to sit in this way. Similar to her reference to

how upset she would feel if she were overweight herself, Amanda illustrates her personal investment in the healthism discourse by expressing sadness about these children's weight 'issues'. She positions their overweight as the result of eating 'bad' food (given to them by their parents) and not engaging in physical activity. She then positions preschool as the time to get children "interested" in physical activity. In another excerpt, Amanda spoke about children at the school not having many opportunities for physical activity in the form of sports clubs because "their parents couldn't afford those sorts of luxuries" (Amanda, Oakdale). She positioned this as the driver for another way the staff 'took responsibility' for children's health – by providing after school clubs free of charge.

Amanda told me that another way the children were informed about 'healthy' practices was through the school's annual 'health week'. She elaborated on what this involved:

...we get people from local restaurants to come and show the children how to make a healthy lunch and, you know, just little tips like, "Don't put mayonnaise on this" and don't, you know... Em...and if you're going to...people come from the dentist – all the children take trips to the dentist and that sort of thing where they tell them the whole, "Don't eat sugary things between meals. You can have, like, a treat after your dinner and that's the best time to eat it" and all that sort of thing. ... Just little tips that the children, that they wouldn't have anyone at home saying, "Don't eat that now". ... You know, "It's not good for your teeth". ... They would just go and do it anyway, you know, and no-one would stop them. (Amanda, Oakdale)

Health week involved 'experts' like chefs and dentists telling children about what foods are 'bad' for them. This expert guidance can be interpreted as the 'mode of subjection' (Foucault, 1992) of healthism. Without this advice, children would eat fatty, sugary foods because nobody at home would tell them not to; Amanda again positions the role models children encounter at school as positive and those at home as negative. In this excerpt, Amanda shows that while she subscribes to healthism, and its concern with 'healthy' eating and activity practices, she accepts that 'bad' foods need not be eliminated altogether; it is okay to have 'unhealthy' treats now and then. This relates to something she said when talking specifically about preschool children; she spoke about the importance of not pushing 'healthy eating' messages

too strongly, as it was important not to have children “worrying about eating bad things when they’re three” (Amanda, Oakdale). She said that the focus in preschool should be on:

...just the idea of everything in moderation and when they’re saying, “I want another cake” and you try and explain, “Well we all have one because that’s all we need and if we want something else, then we can have a piece of fruit”. (Amanda, Oakdale)

Amanda took a different approach to portraying the ‘healthy food message’ to the seven- and eight-year-olds she taught after leaving her position as the nursery teacher. She told me about a ‘league table’ system she ran, whereby children could earn points for their ‘team’ by bringing in fruit for their snack (i.e. instead of chocolate, crisps or other ‘bad’ foods). She positioned the strategy as having been a successful way of encouraging the children to eat more healthily:

...it’s amazing ’cause I only started doing it a couple of weeks ago, no, about a month ago now, and it used...it went from, like, the whole class having a packet of *Rolos* and a can of *Irn Bru* to, like, half the class has a piece of fruit for their snack! [*Laughs*] And I’m so pleased ’cause they’re eating, like, loads more healthily, but they’re only doing it for these table points, which means they get extra playtime at the end of the week. ... But yeah, it’s amazing ’cause just by doing that, just, like, slight incentive, then there’s...there’s, like, half the class eating a piece of fruit instead of a bag of crisps at snack-time, which makes a big difference. (Amanda, Oakdale)

Despite the ‘success’ of the points system, Amanda noted that some children found ways to challenge or resist it; a number of them brought in miniature packets of raisins along with chocolate bars and asked if they could get points for the raisins! Thus, the children challenged the ‘mode of subjection’ associated with being an ‘ethical subject’ (Foucault, 1992) of the healthism discourse, as privileged by Amanda. When I asked Amanda why she ran this activity, her reason was that ‘junk’ food made the children “go hyper” and thus was not appropriate “for children that age...in the middle of the day, when they’ve still got learning to do” (Amanda, Oakdale). Thus, not only is the ‘telos’ of the ‘ethical work’ (Foucault, 1992) Amanda was encouraging a ‘healthy’ child, but a calm, diligent student. This contention that ‘unhealthy’ eating practices are detrimental to children’s learning provides Amanda

with a justification for monitoring their lunchboxes in this way. Her use of the word “hyper” portrays the message that, while physical activity is ‘good’, there are limits to how active children ‘should’ be. Thus, physical activity sometimes needs to be restricted.

Restricting physical activity was something Amanda also talked about in relation to preschool children in particular. Engaging in totalisation and normalisation (Gore, 1995), she positioned preschoolers as ‘naturally’ physical active by telling me they loved running around, to the point that she felt like she spent half her time telling them it was against the rules to run in the nursery classroom. She wondered why it was that preschoolers were so eager to be physically active, while many older children were not:

They [preschoolers] all love it, and you think, at what stage do we stop, like, getting from A to B by running? Because if they’re getting anywhere, they would rather run than walk. To get anywhere. You know, from the toilet back into the nursery, they would rather run than walk. And then you think, at what stage do you get to those Primary Fives sitting on the carpet and you’re saying, “It’s time for PE” and they’re making up excuses why they don’t want to go. (Amanda, Oakdale)

Amanda engaged in the technology of the self of critical self-reflection (Foucault, 1992) by questioning if perhaps her practice of repeatedly telling preschool children not to run, while simultaneously talking to them about the importance of physical activity, could have been sending them mixed messages. Drawing on developmental discourses and engaging in totalisation and normalisation (Gore, 1995), she reflected on how to keep preschoolers’ “natural, kind of, love for being active [as they moved] all the way up the school” (Amanda, Oakdale). She talked about the importance of fun, enjoyment and teaching children that they could be physically active in many different ways to this quest.

Physical activity was an important element of Amanda’s life, both professionally and personally. She constructed it in relation to health and as a means of working on bodies (both her own and the children’s). Amanda’s talk therefore showed she strongly aligned with healthism. She positioned preschool children as ‘naturally’

physically active, but older children as less interested in it. Amanda stressed the importance of the staff at Oakdale teaching the children about ‘healthy’ practices, as she felt they were unlikely to learn about these outside of school because of a lack of ‘good’ role models.

### **7.2.3 Jean**

Jean, who was in her fifties, had been the manager of Sunnyland since 1998. She had graduated with a diploma in early childhood education in Canada in 1993, having spent five years studying part-time while working as an educational assistant with children and young people who had learning disabilities. Jean told me her qualification was not officially recognised in Scotland, and because recent government legislation required managers of early childhood settings to be qualified to degree level, she was undertaking a BA in childhood studies on a part-time basis.

Jean said that doing this course, while working full-time, meant she did not have the time or energy to participate in physical activity as often as she would have liked. She explained, for instance, that while she used to play golf, she currently did not have enough time to play it. Similarly, while she used to walk a lot, she said that, “at the moment, I don’t even walk to work and I know that’s terrible, but I’ve just not got the energy just now” (Jean, Sunnyland). Jean’s reference to ‘knowing’ that her lack of engagement in physical activity is “terrible” implies that she feels guilty because she thinks she ‘should’ be more physically active. It could also indicate that she assumes *I* – a physical education researcher – think this, and so feels compelled to justify her ‘confession’ (Foucault, 1993b). She appears in this instance to be invested in the discourse that characterises physical activity as ‘good’ and ‘necessary’. However, she engaged with this discourse more critically when explaining that, at the moment, an emphasis on physical activity would not have been beneficial for her. Talking about walking to work, she explained:

It’s a 40 minute walk, so it’s quite...yeah, and by the time you get here, you’re quite tired and it’s maybe too much for me. So you have to look at yourself, how you’re feeling at the moment as well. (Jean, Sunnyland)



In this excerpt, Jean implies that she engaged in the technology of the self of self-reflection (Foucault, 1992) regarding physical activity practices. She questioned if engaging in particular forms of physical activity would have been beneficial to her given her current circumstances, and concluded that they would not. She therefore positioned physical activity as potentially detrimental to health and wellbeing, depending on individual circumstances. She thus showed that she did not align with the notion of physical activity as unquestionably ‘good’. She did, however, say that while walking and golfing would have been “too much” for her at present, she engaged in Pilates once a week. She talked about the benefits of Pilates in terms of both physical health, and health and wellbeing more widely. She maintained it aided her breathing and her core strength. She also said that because she attended it with her sister and niece, it was a social activity in which they had “a good laugh together” (Jean, Sunnyland). Jean similarly talked about the social benefits of golf:

...hopefully once I get finished with my degree, I will be able to go back to golfing 'cause I like golfing. I'm not very good at it, but, you know, it's good fun and again it's just the fact of being out in the fresh air and being out and about and enjoying being out with other people as well 'cause you usually go in a group, right, so it's good. (Jean, Sunnyland)

It seems that, in Jean's personal life, while physical activity was positioned as having benefits for physical health, it was more important to her in terms of socialising and enjoyment. Thus, the ‘ethical substance’ (Foucault, 1992) of the physical activity she engages in is not solely her self in corporeal terms.

When speaking about ‘physical education’ at Sunnyland, Jean again engaged with the notion of physical activity in different ways. As noted in Chapter Five, when asked about the focus of preschool ‘physical education’, she constructed physical activity as important in terms of both children's health and their behaviour.

Regarding health, Jean talked about the importance of “exercise” and, like Amanda, positioned physical activity as a means of preventing overweight and obesity. She revealed that she engaged in surveillance of children's bodies by referring to a child at Sunnyland who was ‘overweight’:

...we've got one little boy that's a little bit chubby, should one say, and you see him and he's trying and he does, but he's just not got the same get up and go as the other children, who really their weight is correct, you know? Whereas you can tell he's just a little bit overweight – well, not a little bit, quite a bit – and his parents are trying to do something about it, but it's unfortunate he likes to drink anything that's got sugar in it, you know? So...but we've been at the hospital and we've got the...you know, we're working through that as well, but you can see the difference with somebody that can just pick themselves up and run and some of them are very, very quick. (Jean, Sunnyland)

In this excerpt, Jean positions herself as an 'ethical subject' (Foucault, 1992) of healthism by characterising the boy's overweight as the result of a lack of "get up and go" combined with overindulgence on sugary drinks. His overweight is thus the result of his engagement in particular 'bad' practices. Jean engages in classification (Gore, 1995) by comparing the boy's 'bad' practices to those of the other children at Sunnyland, whose weight she deems to be "correct" and who she says are more motivated to run around. In contrast to the 'overweight' boy, these other children are therefore positioned as 'good' subjects of neoliberal and healthism discourses. Although the boy 'tries' to be active, he is seen to be in need of medical intervention and thus salvation (Vander Schee & Boyles, 2010). While Jean talks about his parents seeking the intervention, her use of the words "we've" and "we're" implies that she too is involved in the intervention in some way.

Jean similarly talked in terms of 'intervening' or 'taking responsibility' for children's physical activity when discussing the importance of providing them with opportunities they would not get outside of Sunnyland. Much like the way Amanda spoke about the staff at Oakdale 'taking responsibility' for teaching the children there about health, Jean repeatedly mentioned that because many children at Sunnyland lived in city centre flats, they spent long periods indoors and so it was crucial to provide them with opportunities for physical activity at the nursery:

...I know a lot of these children live in flats and I know they don't get out – they'll go home from here, five o'clock, that's it, they will not be over the door again until they come back here in the morning. And even some of the ones that finish at 12 o'clock, they go home and they're indoors, that's it, they don't go anywhere. (Jean, Sunnyland)

In explaining why she thought the children had few opportunities for physical activity, Jean aligned with nostalgic notions of children nowadays not spending as much time outdoors as children did in the past (Burdette & Whitaker, 2005; Clements, 2004). Jean also talked about parents being too tired or busy to engage in physical activity with their children. She therefore chose to provide children with opportunities for physical activity at nursery as she characterised it as something they ‘needed’ to experience.

Jean told me that she and the other practitioners at Sunnyland often spoke to the children about physical activity and healthy eating. She said it was not that they set out to ‘teach’ the children about these notions, but that they regularly came up in a more informal way. She said, for instance, that if a child spoke about having been swimming, the practitioners would talk to the child about how swimming is “really good for your body” (Jean, Sunnyland). Regarding healthy eating, Jean said the staff regularly talked to the children about the importance of eating fruit and vegetables, again in an informal way. She described this as a “natural” approach, a way for the children to engage in “natural learning” (Jean, Sunnyland), implying that a more direct teaching approach would be ‘unnatural’. Her comments support Stephen’s (2005) point that didactic pedagogical approaches are resisted in Scottish preschool education.

Despite this “natural” approach, Jean said there was a greater emphasis on informing children about healthy eating nowadays than there had been in the past. She said that five years ago, she would not have been so concerned about it. I asked why this was and she implied that it related to panics about the so-called ‘obesity epidemic’:

I think it’s because of the hype in the media and everything as well. It’s brought you, made you more aware. I think I’m actually healthier; I eat better than I did years back and I do think it does help everybody. (Jean, Sunnyland)

Again, Jean shows she is invested in healthism. She buys into its ‘mode of subjection’ (Foucault, 1992) regarding ‘healthy’ eating practices. Although she uses the word “hype”, she does not use it in a negative or critical sense; rather, media

“hype” about ‘bad’ eating practices has been a positive thing that has ‘informed’ people (herself included) and consequently ‘helped’ them become healthier by choosing to engage in ‘better’ eating practices. Jean’s talk appears to support McDermott’s (in press) contention that “the media play a fundamental role in shaping...the public’s understanding of these [neoliberal] health issues” (p. 18).

Jean engaged more critically with this emphasis on ‘healthy eating’, however, when talking about a Care Commission<sup>15</sup> inspection. She told me an inspector visited Sunnyland on the day of the children’s Halloween party and criticised the practitioners for providing the children with ‘unhealthy’ food:

The children had a couple of sweets and they had a little cake and they had some crisps. ... I tried to explain to her [the inspector] that that’s what you do at a party. ... And she said, “Yes, I understand that” but she said because another parent – and it says it on our report – that a parent had asked about the...do the children eat healthy food all the time, on this questionnaire that they had sent out and we always say yes, because we always give them healthy food, but of course on the day that she came, they didn’t get healthy food, so she marked us down for that. (Jean, Sunnyland)

Jean shows here that she does not align with healthism to the point that ‘bad’ foods should be eliminated altogether. Similar to the young women in Atencio’s (2010) study of multi-ethnic young people’s engagements with health discourses, Jean positions ‘unhealthy’ foods such as sweets, cakes and crisps as treats that can be a source of pleasure. Rather than merely critically thinking about the inspector’s judgement, Jean engaged in a critical practice (Thorpe, 2008) by actively challenging her and trying to justify the party. She told me she asked the inspector not to write about the party in her inspection report, and expressed frustration that the inspector was unwilling to engage with her argument.

Jean also spoke about the Care Commission when talking about health in relation to safety and risk. She explained that she found it frustrating when health and safety regulations demanded all risk of injury to be eliminated. Acknowledging that it was

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<sup>15</sup> The Care Commission regulated and inspected all care services in Scotland. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2011, its work passed to a new body, Social Care and Social Work Improvement Scotland (SCSWIS).

important to have some regulations, she said she hoped the Care Commission would become slightly more lenient, as risk and minor injury were an important part of everyday life:

So I think they're trying to be a bit more lenient. ... You know, this is going to be the case and I hope so, because it's far too stringent just now – “Oh my goodness, somebody's fallen! Oh my! Oh! Oh there's blood!” ... It's not the end of the world – it's only a wee scrape on the knee, you know... (Jean, Sunnyland)

Jean expressed the view that overly stringent regulations led to children being denied particular physical experiences, such as opportunities to use equipment they could swing on, with the risk of falling off. She engaged in self-reflection (Foucault, 1992) by talking about how her own childhood experiences of being covered in bruises because of crashing her bicycle and falling off walls and out of trees were important physical learning experiences. She said it was important for children to realise it was okay to fall and get skinned knees and bruises, as it was vital not to “wrap the children in cotton wool” (Jean, Sunnyland). Thus, while Jean constructed physical activity as important for ‘good’ health in terms of preventing overweight and obesity, she also talked about some physical activities as a means of helping children learn that minor incidences of ‘ill-health’ in relation to physical injuries and ailments were a ‘normal’ part of everyday life. Jean’s talk about the importance of children learning how to cope with the risk of injuries appeared to align with the neoliberal emphasis on individuals being personally responsible for risk management (Evans & Davies, 2004b).

Another way Jean discussed physical activity was in relation to regulating children’s behaviour. I noted in Chapter Five that when asked about the focus of preschool ‘physical education’, Jean talked about the importance of giving children the chance to ‘burn up energy’ so they did not “get themselves into trouble” (Jean, Sunnyland). She explained that ‘letting off steam’ helped children concentrate, and so made life easier for practitioners:

That's why our children go to the garden twice a day, so that they get rid of some of that energy because we did have two years that we were in here and we didn't get out very much at all and I remember thinking at four o'clock – because we only worked 'til four then – “Oh thank goodness!” Whereas now, because they've been outside, they've lost a lot of their energy, so when they come back in then it's easier for them to concentrate as well, because they've not got so much energy to have to get rid of. (Jean, Sunnyland)

In this instance, physical activity is positioned as important in relation to learning – not in terms of 'physical education', but as a vehicle for aiding children's 'classroom' learning. Energy is characterised as something negative, in that it restricts children's abilities to concentrate and consequently makes practitioners' jobs more difficult. Opportunities for physical activity are thus a technique of regulation; children are easier to 'manage' after using up some energy.

For Jean, there were numerous reasons why it was important that the children at Sunnyland had opportunities for physical activity. She repeatedly stated that many of them had few chances for it outside of the nursery, because of living in city centre flats. She talked about physical activity as significant in terms of children's health, as it was a means of working on their bodies in order to prevent overweight and obesity. Jean also positioned 'good' eating practices as important in this regard, although she was critical of the discourse in which 'healthy' eating was emphasised to the point that children could not have occasional treats. She was similarly critical of discourses and regulations related to health and safety in which all risk of injury had to be eliminated. In her view, such regulations deprived children of important corporeal experiences by restricting the types of physical activities they could engage in. A final way Jean talked about physical activity was in relation to regulating children's behaviour by allowing them to burn off 'excess' energy.

#### **7.2.4 Discussion of Amanda's and Jean's talk**

Both Amanda and Jean spoke about physical activity in terms of health and specifically obesity prevention. Their talk showed that they 'bought into' the healthism discourse. By referring to children at their settings who were overweight, both women showed that, as a result of their investment in healthism, they engaged in surveillance and classification of children's bodies (Burrows & Wright, 2004;

Gard & Wright, 2001). Consequently, they characterised preschool ‘physical education’ as a context for working on children’s bodies. Children were thus positioned as in ‘need’ of disciplinary practices associated with the concept of biopedagogies (Harwood, 2009); children are ‘docile’ bodies (Foucault, 1991e) that must be monitored, regulated and controlled by adults. Amanda and Jean talked about practitioners’ ‘responsibility’ to encourage children to be active and, particularly in Amanda’s case, to educate them about health. In this way, their talk depicted the Cartesian mind/body dualism by emphasising that children should be informed about physical activity and eating practices in order to ‘work’ on their bodies and become ‘healthy’ subjects. As such, the two women positioned children’s bodies as objects to be monitored and shaped (Shilling, 2003) once their minds had the ‘knowledge’ and strength to conduct these disciplinary bodily practices (Kontopodis, in press).

Amanda’s and Jean’s discussions of encouraging children to be active and educating them about health positioned Oakdale and Sunnyland as appropriate sites for promoting healthy lifestyles. This aligns with the contention of Cale and Harris (in press) and Gard (2004b) that schools, and physical education contexts in particular, are increasingly positioned as important sites for health promotion. Although the women appeared to recognise that structural factors including social issues and inequalities can impact on children’s health, their overriding message was that “education” about health and wellbeing would enable children to lead healthy lives. I suggest, however, that the simplistic construction of education about health and wellbeing as the key to a healthy life ignores the “day-to-day realities of people’s lives” (Gard & Wright, 2005, p. 143) and obscures the structural and environmental factors that constrain their abilities to make ‘good’ choices (Bell *et al.*, 2009).

Amanda’s and Jean’s talk about physical activity and health appeared to position children as change agents for families and communities (Burrows & Wright, 2007). Amanda in particular implied that if children were educated about health, they would be able to resist the ‘unhealthy’ practices available to them at home and thus introduce ‘healthier’ practices into their families and communities. Following

Burrows and Wright (2007), I suggest that this may be a problematic objective. It may stigmatise certain people (e.g. those from lower socio-economic groups) as ‘at risk’ and in need of intervention (Bell *et al.*, 2009; Burrows, 2011; Evans, 2003; Evans *et al.*, 2003; Evans *et al.*, 2008; Gard & Wright, 2001; Gard & Wright, 2005; Vander Schee, 2009a).

Analysis of Amanda’s and Jean’s talk supported the view that positioning children as change agents for families and communities can lead to certain people being stigmatised. According to Amanda and Jean, children who were from low socio-economic backgrounds or who lived in city centre flats ‘needed’ interventions related to physical activity and health at their educational settings, as they would not learn about or experience these notions at home. Amanda’s talk showed that there was a major emphasis on staff ‘taking responsibility’ for children’s health at Oakdale, as the children there were considered to be particularly ‘at risk’ because of their ‘disadvantaged’ backgrounds. Amanda therefore positioned the children at Oakdale as “deficient, disadvantaged and in need of intervention” (O’Flynn, 2010, p. 433). Her talk supported Evans and Rich’s (2011) suggestion that discourses and practices concerned with obesity prevention are a contemporary version of the child-saving movement, because of their intention “to rescue a child population ‘at risk’ not just from bad health but bad parents and family inadequacies that are deemed to produce it” (p. 366). While Jean similarly positioned some children at Sunnyland as in need of ‘salvation’, it is notable that the practitioners at Cheery Faces – which is located in a suburban, ‘middle class’ area – did not position children in this way. None of the practitioners at Cheery Faces talked in terms of the children needing ‘rescuing’ from ‘problematic’ and ‘risky’ family lives (O’Flynn, 2004). Thus, the settings made particular meanings, discourses, practices and ultimately subjectivities available to the participants. The settings were therefore implicated in the production of the participants’ subjectivities (O’Flynn, 2004).

While Amanda and Jean subscribed to healthism, Foucault’s concept of the technologies of the self is helpful for understanding that, rather than being dominated by this discourse, they reflected on and chose to engage in practices associated with



it (Wright *et al.*, 2006). For instance, Amanda engaged in physical activity practices on an almost daily basis so she could work on her body and avoid becoming overweight, as she reflected that being ‘out of shape’ would cause her distress. She also chose to encourage the children in her class to eat healthily, as she worried about the effects of eating ‘bad’ foods on their health and their learning. Similarly, Jean chose to provide the children at Sunnyland with twice daily opportunities for outdoor physical activity because she viewed it as a means of benefiting their health and regulating their behaviour. She also chose to personally participate in Pilates because she felt it had physical and social benefits for her, unlike other forms of physical activity, which, given her current circumstances – working full-time and studying for a degree – she positioned as potentially detrimental, rather than beneficial, to her health and wellbeing.

As these examples indicate, Jean was more inclined to critically engage with notions of health and physical activity than Amanda was. While both women expressed the view that a ‘healthy’ lifestyle need not mean the complete elimination of ‘bad’ foods from the diet, Jean was particularly resistant to regulation that insisted on the eradication of all ‘risks’ to health. In this way, Jean gave the impression that she had no desire for a sense of ‘certainty’ or ‘control’ provided by ‘experts’ (Evans, 2003; Gard & Wright, 2001). Indeed, she was not afraid to challenge an ‘expert’ from the Care Commission regarding the stringency of their regulations concerning ‘healthy’ eating practices. Jean expressed frustration, however, that this ‘expert’ stifled her attempts at resistance by not engaging with her argument. The ‘expert’ illustrated her position of power over Jean by criticising the practitioners at Sunnyland in her inspection report, despite Jean’s protestations.

There were both similarities and differences in the ways Jean and Amanda engaged with the notions of physical activity and health. As Wright *et al.* (2006) observe, people negotiate and take up particular discourses in various ways. I now turn my attention to the ways in which the children engaged with these discourses.

## **7.3 Children's engagements with physical activity and health discourses**

### **7.3.1 Overview of children's talk about physical activity and health**

As noted in Chapter Five, many of the children engaged with the notions of health and physical activity. Similar to the children in Burrows *et al.*'s (2002) and Burrows *et al.*'s (2009) studies, they primarily positioned health in corporeal terms, and regularly talked about 'good' eating practices. Indeed, food was the first thing many of the children mentioned when asked about health. Their responses when asked if they ever did anything at nursery to help them be healthy included:

Eat vegetables. ... And fruit. (Beth, Oakdale, interview)

Fruit is always healthy. (Colin, Oakdale, interview)

We eat and drink in the snack room. (Amber, Cheery Faces, interview)

Like eat vegetables. ... 'Cause it's... 'cause it's got vitamin C in it. (Michelle, Cheery Faces, interview)

Mmm...lunch. ... Or breakfast makes you healthy. (Laurel, Sunnyland, interview)

Eat snack. ... But mostly when it's not chocolate! [*Laughs*] (Oscar, Sunnyland, interview)

These quotes show that the children were aware of the healthism message that positions certain foods as 'good' (e.g. fruit, vegetables) and others as 'bad' (e.g. chocolate). Michelle even 'proves' that eating vegetables is important by drawing on a medical or scientific discourse related to their "vitamin C" content.

As well as talking about 'healthy' eating practices, many of the children referred to physical activity when asked about health. Some of them talked about physical activity in terms of exercise and fitness. For instance, when Russell, during a mind-mapping session at Oakdale, told me he exercised during 'physical education',

Ashleigh explained that exercise meant working on becoming fit. I asked her to elaborate on this:

- NOLLAIG: What does 'fit' mean?  
ASHLEIGH: It means we have to do loads of running and jogging.  
NOLLAIG: "We have to do loads of running and jogging" – I'm going to write that down [on the mind-map]. "We have to do loads of..." – what did you say again?  
ASHLEIGH: Running and jogging.  
NOLLAIG: "Running and jogging". And do you like running and jogging, Ashleigh?  
ASHLEIGH: Yeah.  
NOLLAIG: Really? Yeah? Anything else you like doing? Any other activities?  
ASHLEIGH: I like to eat fruit so I can keep healthy.  
NOLLAIG: Oh that's a great one – you like to eat fruit so you can keep healthy. Who knows what that means, 'healthy'?  
ASHLEIGH: It means to keep very...it's to mean keep...it's to mean don't eat bad food or bad food will make you not...or bad food will make you ill, so you must eat good food, so then it won't make you ill.

(Ashleigh, Oakdale, mind-mapping)

In this excerpt, Ashleigh connects the notions of exercise, fitness, physical activity and health. Having referred to exercise in terms of getting fit, she talks about fitness in terms of physical activity ("loads of running and jogging"). By saying "we have to", she positions fitness and physical activity as necessary. Ashleigh then talks about eating practices in relation to health. She creates a binary between "bad food" and "good food"; fruit is "good food" that helps her "keep healthy", while "bad food" can make her ill. She thus positions health as 'not being ill'. Like fitness and physical activity, healthy eating practices are constructed as imperative ("you must eat good food"). Ashleigh thus positions 'good' eating and physical activity practices as a means of working on her body in order to prevent illness. She therefore displays awareness of the 'mode of subjection' and 'ethical work' (Foucault, 1992) associated with healthism. Ashleigh's comments in this instance are consistent with what she said during the discussions I observed Amanda having with the children about physical education in the months prior to the mind-mapping sessions. During two of these discussions, I observed Ashleigh speaking about health, exercise and fitness. For instance, in the discussion detailed in Chapter Five (see p. 157), she similarly

spoke about ‘good’ eating practices in relation to health, while in referring to getting “flu jabs”, she again characterised being healthy as ‘not being ill’.

I was not surprised, given the discussions Amanda and Stacey had with the children about the importance of physical activity for health – and indeed the emphasis on health interventions at Oakdale more widely – that ‘exercise’ and ‘fitness’ were concepts the children there talked about. As noted in Chapter Five, numerous children at the other settings also engaged with these notions. For instance, Tristan at Sunnyland regularly talked about exercise and fitness. When he told me he ran around in the garden so he could get fit, I asked him what he meant by this:

NOLLAIG: What does ‘fit’ mean? How do you know if you’re fit?

*[Silence for approximately two seconds]*

TRISTAN: You have to practise.

NOLLAIG: You have to practise?

TRISTAN: Yeah.

NOLLAIG: Aww, you have to practise to get fit?

TRISTAN: Yeah.

NOLLAIG: I see.

TRISTAN: Yip.

NOLLAIG: So how do you know if somebody is fit?

TRISTAN: Mmm...they practise.

NOLLAIG: Because they practise?

TRISTAN: Yeah.

NOLLAIG: And what do they practise?

TRISTAN: They’ll run.

NOLLAIG: Aww, running?

TRISTAN: They run with their head down.

NOLLAIG: Running with their head down? And do you think it’s important to be fit?

TRISTAN: Yeah.

NOLLAIG: Yeah? Why is it important?

TRISTAN: ’Cause you have to get fit.

NOLLAIG: ’Cause you have to get fit?

TRISTAN: Yeah.

NOLLAIG: Yeah? How do you know that? Did somebody tell you that?

TRISTAN: No, I just done it.

(Tristan, Sunnyland)

By talking about “practise”, Tristan positions fitness as something that has to be worked at; a ‘fit’ person is someone who regularly ‘practises’ running. His reference

to people running “with their head down” may indicate that this ‘practise’ takes effort. Tristan positions getting fit as ‘necessary’ (“you have to”), as well as a ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ practice; it is something he ‘just does’, without needing to be told or encouraged. In this way, he characterises himself as independent and responsible for his own fitness; this may indicate that he has taken up the rational, responsible subject position associated with neoliberalism (Macdonald, 2011).

When asked about things they did at nursery to help them to be healthy, the vast majority of the children’s responses related to healthy eating and physical activity. There were a small number of responses referring to different practices. For instance, Joanna and Colin (both Oakdale) talked about the importance of getting sleep, Elle (Oakdale) mentioned washing her hands, and Bill (Cheery Faces), Tristan (Sunnyland) and Laurel (Sunnyland) talked about looking after their teeth. As is soon discussed, Abbie and Jane (both Sunnyland) also mentioned numerous other practices when asked about how to be healthy. In all of the children’s responses, only two did not relate to health as a corporeal notion: Elle (Oakdale) spoke about sharing, while Erin (Oakdale) mentioned helping her friends tidy up. Since all other responses positioned health in corporeal terms, the ‘ethical substance’ (Foucault, 1992) of the majority of the ‘healthy’ practices the children told me about was the body. The children also talked about the effects of exercise in this way, thus positioning it as a means of working on their bodies. For instance, regarding exercise, Colin (Oakdale) and Michelle (Cheery Faces) talked about building strength, Dan and David (both Cheery Faces) talked about healthy bones, Ian (Cheery Faces) mentioned getting sweaty, Dan, David and Jane (Sunnyland) referred to being energised, Dan, David and Abbie (Sunnyland) mentioned tiredness, and Abbie referred to avoiding getting fat. While Abbie was the only child to explicitly talk about physical activity in terms of avoidance of overweight and obesity, Joanna appeared to indirectly refer to these issues when explaining what ‘fit and healthy’ meant:

- NOLLAIG: What does it mean to do exercise? Do you know, Joanna?  
BETH: It’s to keep you fit.  
JOANNA: To keep you fit and healthy.  
NOLLAIG: Keep you fit and healthy – what does that mean? What does ‘fit and healthy’ mean?

JOANNA: That means you can stay healthy and not be greedy.  
(Beth and Joanna, Oakdale, interview)

Joanna characterises greed as incompatible with ‘good’ health. As such, her contention that exercise leads to fitness and health seems to suggest that a lack of exercise could lead to greediness; ‘bad’ health is thus positioned as the result of laziness and greed. Joanna therefore appears to link ‘bad’ health with moral failings (Burrows, 2010b; Evans, 2003; Gard & Wright, 2005). Concomitantly, she seems to position exercise as a means of developing greater self-control regarding eating practices. By making these judgements, Joanna implies that good health is achievable through avoidance of ‘bad’ practices (Crawford, 1980); she therefore appears to position herself as an ‘ethical subject’ (Foucault, 1992) of healthism.

Despite Joanna’s allusion to a connection between physical activity and overweight and obesity, Abbie, as mentioned, was the only child to explicitly talk about physical activity in terms of preventing weight gain. Abbie was also the only child to talk about ‘good’ food in relation to weight. The general absence of references to weight in the children’s talk could perhaps be because other practitioners agree with the view of Amanda who, as noted, expressed caution about overemphasising ‘healthy’ food messages to preschool children (see p. 227-228). Perhaps other preschool practitioners are similarly wary about talking directly to children about why they are being encouraged to ‘eat fruit’ and ‘be active’. While practitioners’ intentions may be preventing childhood overweight and obesity, perhaps they prefer to talk to the children in more generic terms about certain foods and physical activity being important for good health, without really explaining why. This could explain why some children, when I asked what terms like exercise, health and fitness meant, repeated these terms in a circular fashion. It seemed that many of them were familiar with these words, but struggled to explain what they meant.

Some children, however, engaged with notions of health and physical activity in more depth. While so far, I have provided a general discussion of how all the children talked about these concepts, I now provide a more thorough analysis of how four of them – two pairs: Abbie and Jane, and Dan and David – engaged with

physical activity and health discourses. I have chosen to discuss the talk of these children in particular because, firstly, both pairs engaged with the notions of physical activity and health in depth, and secondly, they talked about these topics in both similar and different ways. They all talked about physical activity in relation to health, and all positioned health in corporeal terms. However, while Dan and David talked about ‘good’ health in relation to having strong bones and lots of energy, Abbie and Jane tended to talk about it in terms of avoidance of ‘bad’ health.

### **7.3.2 Abbie and Jane**

Abbie and Jane attended Sunnyland. When fieldwork began, Abbie was almost three-and-a-half years old, while Jane had just turned three. The girls participated in the same mind-mapping session, and both took part in multiple interviews; Abbie participated in eight, while Jane did six. On four occasions, I interviewed the girls together. They appeared to be good friends who spent a lot of time together at the nursery. They were chatty and articulate, and readily engaged with the questions I asked. Abbie was ‘white’, while Jane appeared to be Scottish of Asian origin (she spoke fluent English with a Scottish accent).

Abbie and Jane engaged with the notions of health and physical activity in multiple ways. Like many of the other children, they conceived of health as a corporeal notion, and when asked if they did anything at nursery to help them to be healthy, their initial responses related to eating practices. After telling me about the importance of eating fruit, snacks and lunch, they provided numerous other suggestions that similarly focused specifically on physical health:

- ABBIE: But the most important thing is to never touch a crocodile.  
 NOLLAIG: That’s the most important thing to stay healthy – never touch a crocodile?  
 ABBIE: No, ’cause...’cause if you touch a crocodile, it will...  
 JANE: It will just bite your thumb.  
 ABBIE: ’Cause it will eat you up.  
 NOLLAIG: Oh right, I see.  
 JANE: If you go in the river and you don’t see a crocodile, there might be one hiding under the sea and you might see some nudge and he’ll pop out really quickly and then eat you all up.  
 NOLLAIG: Oh wow, because you might see what? The crocodile?

ABBIE: *[Excitedly]* Yeah!  
 NOLLAIG: Oh wow, oh. And so is there anything else you can do to be healthy?  
 ABBIE: Em...  
 JANE: *[Re something on her colouring sheet]* Hey, get this off.  
 ABBIE: Em...  
 NOLLAIG: Can you think of anything, Abbie or Jane?  
 ABBIE: To never get sunburnt. You can put...  
 NOLLAIG: That's a very good one actually, to never get sunburnt.  
 ABBIE: 'Cause... 'cause there's...  
 JANE: Don't stay close to the fire.  
 ABBIE: 'Cause if you... 'cause... 'cause... 'cause if you get sunburnt, it will hurt you then.  
 NOLLAIG: That's right, and Jane said as well to never stay close to fire as well. Very good.  
 ABBIE: Fire's the most important thing not to touch.  
 ...  
 NOLLAIG: Anything else to help you stay healthy?  
 ABBIE: To not...to not...  
 JANE: Stay...  
 ABBIE: To not go across the road when a car is coming.  
 NOLLAIG: Aww, excellent – don't go across the road when there's a car coming. That's another really good one.  
 JANE: Don't stay close to fireman.  
 NOLLAIG: Don't stay close to a fireman? Okay, why?  
 ABBIE: 'Cause... 'cause... 'cause the fire.  
 NOLLAIG: Okay.  
 ABBIE: It makes you not really...  
 NOLLAIG: Okay.  
 ABBIE: 'Cause the fire doesn't make you breathe.  
 NOLLAIG: Okay, 'cause if there's a fireman that probably means there's a fire somewhere, is it?  
 ABBIE: Yeah.

(Abbie and Jane, Sunnyland, interview)

In this excerpt, Abbie and Jane position health as 'absence of injury'. They talk about health as something that can be achieved by avoiding 'dangerous' practices like touching crocodiles and fire, getting sunburnt and getting hit by a car. Later in the interview, Jane similarly said it was important to wear a helmet when riding a scooter or bicycle. By positioning health as achievable through avoidance of 'bad' practices (Crawford, 1980), Abbie and Jane foreground the notion of individual responsibility and display awareness of the 'mode of subjection' and 'ethical work' (Foucault, 1992) associated with neoliberal discourses related to avoiding risk (Evans & Davies, 2004b).



After they had spoken about ‘healthy’ eating and ‘dangerous’ practices that could cause injury, I asked Abbie and Jane if they ever did anything in the garden at Sunnyland to help them be healthy. They told me they exercised, and explained that this involved running around. Abbie and Jane engaged with the notions of exercise and physical activity on numerous occasions throughout their interviews. They were in agreement that physical activity was important, but gave different reasons why. Jane said it was important to run around because “it gives you a lot of energy” (Jane, Sunnyland, interview). For Abbie, however, physical activity was important in terms of preventing weight gain:

- NOLLAIG: Do you think it’s important to run around?  
 ABBIE: Well, yes.  
 NOLLAIG: It is?  
 ABBIE: ’Cause if you don’t run around...’cause run arounding is sporting and if you don’t do sporting, your tummy will get fat.  
*[Puts her arms in front of her tummy, as if it is very big]*  
 NOLLAIG: Oh right, so to run around is to be sporty and if you don’t do sports, your tummy will get fat? And you’re showing me, you’re moving your arm out like that. So did somebody tell you that? Who told you that?  
 ABBIE: My dad.  
 NOLLAIG: Your daddy?  
 ABBIE: And my mum.  
 NOLLAIG: And your mummy? Oh right, okay. And so do you...do you like doing sporty things then?  
*[Abbie nods]*  
 NOLLAIG: Yeah? You’re nodding.  
 ABBIE: ’Cause I don’t...I don’t want to get fat.  
 (Abbie, Sunnyland, interview)

In a later interview, Abbie again said, “if you don’t do sport, you get fatter and fatter and fatter” (Abbie, Sunnyland, interview). By connecting the notions of physical activity and weight, Abbie – at four years of age – positions physical activity as a means of working on her body. It appears that, for Abbie, the ‘telos’ (Foucault, 1992) of this discourse and its associated practices is not to be overweight. She positions the ‘fat’ body as ‘other’ in relation to the physically active, ‘sporty’ body. Her talk indicates that she may be fearful of fat (Burrows & Wright, 2007). Her characterisation of overweight and obesity as the result of a lack of physical activity illustrates her alignment with healthism. Abbie’s contention that she gleaned this

‘knowledge’ about avoiding weight gain from her parents shows that healthism operates throughout society, rather than just in educational, or specifically physical education, contexts.

Abbie also showed alignment with healthism by connecting weight gain with ‘bad’ eating practices. When asked if she thought it was important to do things to be healthy, she said:

Eh...yes, 'cause... 'cause if you don't eat fruit and you just eat sweets every day, your tummy will get fatter, fatter, fatter, fatter and then it's not good. ... So you need to buy fruit. (Abbie, Sunnyland, interview)

Like many of the other child participants, Abbie positions eating ‘good’ food such as fruit as essential for being healthy. Unlike the other children, however, Abbie conceptualises being healthy as ‘not being fat’. In a later interview, when I again asked about the importance of doing things to be healthy, both Abbie and Jane told me it was ‘bad’ to eat lots of sweets because “you just get fatter and fatter and fatter” (Abbie, Sunnyland, interview) to the point that “your tummy will just pop...and your tummy will just be broken” (Jane, Sunnyland, interview). The girls again talk about health in solely corporeal terms and again show alignment with healthism.

Abbie and Jane did not align with healthism to the point that ‘sweets’ or other ‘bad’ foods should be eliminated altogether, however; they agreed it was okay to occasionally have a small number of sweets as a treat. Jane explained this was because “if you eat loads, you might get sick” (Jane, Sunnyland, interview). According to Abbie, eating lots of sweets would cause tooth loss. She spoke about the effects of this in social and emotional, as well as physical, terms; she described how if someone’s lost teeth were replaced with “golden” ones, they would not want to go to school. Having ‘bad’ teeth was thus positioned as something children would be embarrassed about or ashamed of. When I asked the girls how they knew too many sweets would damage their teeth, Jane told me about a friend of hers who had “little golden ones” (Jane, Sunnyland, interview). In this way, like some of the children in Burrows’s (2010b) investigation of how young children engaged with

health discourses, Jane indicated that she reflected on and assessed health ‘facts’ against her own experiences, rather than simply repeating something she had been told by an ‘expert’ adult. Her comment also shows that she engaged in surveillance (Gore, 1995) of other children. Answering the same question, Abbie positioned the notion that eating sweets led to ‘bad’ teeth as ‘natural’ and taken for granted; she said it was something she just knew without having been told by anybody. Both girls similarly constructed themselves as independent and responsible when I asked them where they learned about the things they told me were important for keeping healthy; their responses included: “I just learned it myself” (Jane, Sunnyland, interview) and “...we just did it by ourselves” (Abbie, Sunnyland, interview). Emphasising their independence in this way appears to show that they had taken up the rational, responsible subject position associated with neoliberalism (Macdonald, 2011). Abbie’s and Jane’s talk indicated that they had internalised related notions which positioned particular practices in binaries of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, and ‘healthy’ and ‘unhealthy’.

The girls’ contention, however, that it was acceptable to have occasional treats shows that they were not so invested in healthism that all ‘bad’ foods had to be eliminated. Another way they displayed resistance to this discourse was by not eating their snacks at nursery. On numerous occasions, Abbie and Jane were participating in interviews with me when the practitioners announced that snack was ready. Despite telling me about the importance of having snack, Abbie and Jane regularly chose not to eat it, saying they did not want it because, for instance, “...just when [you are] having it, you get a bit full” (Abbie, Sunnyland, interview). An alternative reading is that not wanting to feel “full” relates to Abbie’s apparent fear of fatness (Burrows & Wright, 2007). Thus, she may not have been resisting the discourse that places emphasis on the importance of eating ‘healthy’ food in this instance, but interpreting it in such a way that *any* food can be characterised as ‘bad’ if it leads to her feeling full.

Abbie did show resistance to practices associated with healthism, however, in her talk about physical activity. Despite her emphasis on its importance – and her

numerous assertions that it was enjoyable – in three separate interviews, she complained that physical activity made her tired. While she may have liked the (potential) corporeal effects of physical activity in terms of preventing weight gain, she did not like that it made her feel tired. Thus, for Abbie, physical activity, while ‘important’, was not always ‘good’.

Abbie and Jane talked about physical activity and health in multiple ways. They constructed health in corporeal terms, conceiving of it as ‘absence of injury’ and, particularly in Abbie’s case, lack of overweight and obesity. ‘Good’ health was thus constructed as avoidance of ‘bad’ health. Both girls talked about the importance of ‘good’ eating and physical activity practices.

### **7.3.3 Dan and David**

Dan and David attended Cheery Faces. When fieldwork began, they were both approximately three-and-a-half years old. They were both ‘white’. The boys participated in the same mind-mapping session, and both took part in multiple interviews; Dan did five and David did four. On three occasions, I interviewed them together. Like Abbie and Jane, they were chatty and articulate, and readily engaged with the topics raised.

Similar to Abbie and Jane, Dan and David talked about health in corporeal terms. For Dan and David, however, ‘good’ health was not just avoidance of ‘bad’ health, and rather than listing many ways of ‘being healthy’, the ‘ethical work’ (Foucault, 1992) the two boys primarily talked about was physical activity. When I asked if they ever did things at nursery to help them be healthy, Dan started chanting a song about being ‘fit and healthy’ and doing adjoining actions including clapping and stepping from side to side. David explained that the song played on the CD player and the children joined in with the actions; the boys were clearly referring to *Sticky Kids*. Referring to the song lyrics, I asked Dan and David to tell me what was meant by ‘healthy’:

DAN: *[Pointing to and rubbing his arms]* That means...that means your bones need some energy in.

NOLLAIG: Oh.

DAN: In.

NOLLAIG: Oh.

DAVID: *[Pointing to and rubbing his arms]* Inside, and then you'll be fit and then all the bones will not wobble.

NOLLAIG: Oh, and you're pointing to your arms, boys.

DAN: You need...

NOLLAIG: So if you have got lots of energy in them?

DAN: Yeah, we need to put energy in them.

NOLLAIG: Right, and how do you do that?

DAN: Em...we use some...we use...em...we use 'fit and healthy' song.

NOLLAIG: 'Fit and healthy' song? Where, like what you showed me, you clap your hands and you move side to side and move your arms?

DAN: Yeah.

NOLLAIG: Oh wow.

DAVID: And you always...and sometimes you run on the spot.

*[David, still sitting, moves his legs as if running]*

(Dan and David, Cheery Faces, interview)

Throughout their interviews, Dan and David repeatedly talked about 'healthy bones' when asked about health, exercise and fitness. In the above excerpt, they define being healthy as being "fit" and having strong, 'energetic' bones that do not "wobble". Health is thus positioned in terms of physical strength and performance, while physical activity is characterised as the means of working on the body in order to achieve these 'benefits'.

As noted in Chapter Five, Dan and David also talked about physical activity in relation to their outdoor play. They told me about various 'exercises' they did in the garden (including jumping, running and going on the tractor) and again said that these physical activities were important for healthy bones. David, again referring to bones, talked about vigorous exercise boosting energy levels:

And the bones don't, 'cause when the bones are tired when you're going slow and the bones are tired, then when you...when you run and then when you're on the tractor and sometimes when you run, your bones get...get...your bones...your bones get energy. (David, Cheery Faces, interview)

Dan was in agreement with David's point. Both boys went on to tell me (with demonstrations) that the reason exercise was important was because without it, "the bones get really tired" (David, Cheery Faces, interview). They particularly emphasised that exercise should be vigorous, by showing and telling me that by "walking slowly, your bones get really tired" (David, Cheery Faces, interview). Thus, they again positioned physical activity as a means of working on the body in order to boost energy and 'healthiness'.

As well as talking about *Sticky Kids* and outdoor play in relation to physical activity and exercise, Dan and David told me that the adult-led space bubble activity involved being physically active. Dan explained that this activity involved both running on the spot and running around the garden. While the boys excitedly told me about *Sticky Kids* and physically active outdoor play activities, they talked more critically about the space bubble activity. Dan in particular engaged in critical reflection when I asked the two boys if they liked doing the space bubble activity:

- |          |  |
|----------|--|
| DAVID:   | Uh-huh.  |
| DAN:     | Yeah, but we always do them, you know.                                   |
| NOLLAIG: | You always do them?  |
| DAN:     | Yeah, we a little bit always do them.                                    |
| NOLLAIG: | And do you like doing them, Dan?   |
| DAN:     | Eh...a little bit.   |
| NOLLAIG: | A little bit?  |
| DAVID:   | And I a little bit.  |
| DAN:     | But sometimes I don't and sometimes I do.                                |
| NOLLAIG: | Okay, so why do you not like them sometimes?                             |
| DAN:     | Eh...I don't know.   |
| DAVID:   | I don't like them sometimes either.                                      |
| NOLLAIG: | Don't like...you don't like them sometimes either? Why not?              |
| DAN:     | I do love them sometimes.  |
| NOLLAIG: | You love them sometimes, but sometimes you don't really like them?       |
| DAN:     | No.  |
| NOLLAIG: | And can you tell me why?   |
| DAN:     | I know why I don't like them.  |
| NOLLAIG: | Why?   |
| DAN:     | Because we always have them and that's why I don't like them every time. |
| NOLLAIG: | Oh, so maybe you do them a bit too much, is it?                          |



overweight and obesity. While Abbie was the only child in the study to explicitly express concerns about gaining weight, her talk illustrated that children as young as four years of age may experience feelings such as fear, anxiety and unhappiness because of concerns about their weight (Burrows & Wright, 2004; Evans, 2003; Evans *et al.*, 2004; Gard & Wright, 2001). Abbie's talk showed that an emphasis on obesity discourses can lead preschool children to engage in self-monitoring and self-surveillance regarding their bodies (e.g. physical activity levels and eating practices) (Burrows & Wright, 2004; 2007). Abbie's references to her parents when asked how she 'knew' about the importance of physical activity may indicate that her concern with avoiding becoming overweight stems from her life outside of Sunnyland, rather than her experiences of 'physical education' at preschool.

For Dan and David, 'good' health meant being energised and having strong bones. The vast majority of their talk about health related to the importance of physical activity. In contrast to Abbie, for Dan and David, 'ethical work' (Foucault, 1992) in the form of physical activity was concerned with achieving physical competence and strength, rather than with preventing 'fatness'. 'Being healthy' was thus about achieving something 'good', rather than – as Abbie and Jane positioned it – avoiding something 'bad'. Previous research (e.g. Atencio, 2010; Wright *et al.*, 2006) has found that young men and young women engaged with the notions of health and physical activity in different ways, with young men focusing on the importance of becoming fit and strong, and young women expressing concern with weight and appearance. The talk of Abbie, Jane, Dan and David appears to show that these gender differences may be evident in children of preschool age. However, I am wary of making generalisations in relation to gender. As noted, Abbie was the only child to explicitly express concern about weight gain. Furthermore, as noted earlier (see p. 243), Michelle (Cheery Faces) talked about exercise in terms of building strength. As such, boys and girls often talked about health and physical activity in similar ways.

Despite the differences in the ways Abbie and Jane, and Dan and David constructed health, and despite all four children positioning physical activity as important, they also showed that they could resist healthism. Abbie and Jane talked about eating



treats, while Dan, David and Abbie all talked about not always regarding physical activity as ‘good’ because it sometimes made them bored or tired. Thus, while they may have ‘known’ the rhetoric about ‘good’ eating and physical activity practices, they also showed that they were “neither cultural dopes nor dupes” (Burrows, 2011, p. 349) by engaging with these notions more critically.

## **7.4 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have examined the ways in which the participants engaged with discourses related to physical activity and health. Both the adults’ and children’s talk illustrated the dominance of neoliberal, healthism meanings of health which position individuals as responsible for their own health through engagement in ‘healthy’ practices such as those related to eating and physical activity. Previous studies with children (e.g. Burrows *et al.*, 2002; Burrows *et al.*, 2009), young people (e.g. Atencio, 2010; O’Flynn, 2004) and primary school staff (e.g. Vander Schee, 2009b; Humberstone & Stan, 2011) have reported similar findings. While the adults in the current study tended to talk about physical activity and health in both corporeal terms and in relation to the self more holistically, the children were primarily concerned with physical health. Again, this is similar to how the children in Burrows *et al.*’s (2002) and Burrows *et al.*’s (2009) studies talked about health. However, in contrast to the participants in previous studies by Burrows (2010b) and Macdonald *et al.* (2005), the children in the current study – with the exception of Abbie – tended not talk about ‘good’ food and physical activity practices in relation to weight.

This chapter has shown that the practitioners and children engaged with the notions of physical activity and health in multiple, complex ways. Their talk showed the strength of the healthism discourse. However, Foucault’s notion of the technologies of the self has provided a means of understanding that they were not merely passive recipients of this discourse, but could make choices and thus were actively, consciously involved in ‘taking it up’. As such, they chose to engage in particular practices over others in order to constitute themselves as ‘ethical subjects’ (Foucault, 1992) of healthism. The participants’ conscious involvement in taking up healthism was evident in, for instance, their talk about engaging in practices such as self-

reflection, self-monitoring and self-regulation. It was also evident in the ways they justified their practices, expressed judgements about practices they considered to be ‘bad’, and engaged in ‘othering’ of people whose practices differed from their own.

In Chapter Eight, I draw the thesis to a conclusion and suggest recommendations for future research and practice.

## **Chapter 8 – Conclusion**

### **8.1 Introduction**

This thesis emerged from my desire to investigate ‘what happens’ regarding physical education at preschools. Since this topic has been largely unexplored by researchers, I was eager to investigate what ‘physical education’ meant to preschool practitioners and children. The primary research question the thesis set out to address is:

- What is the place and meaning of ‘physical education’ to practitioners and children at three preschool contexts in a city in Scotland?

Investigating this question required me to address the following sub-questions:

- What are the discourses of physical education at these preschools?
- How do practitioners and children engage with these discourses in order to construct their subjectivities regarding physical education?

To address these questions, I turned to poststructuralism and, more specifically, Foucault’s work around discourses, techniques of power and technologies of the self. Employing these notions to interrogate the physical education discourses at the preschools has allowed me to raise critical questions about particular discourses in order to evaluate and problematise the effects of their ‘work’. Since discourses are instruments and effects of power (Foucault, 1998), Foucault’s – and Gore’s (1995) – work around techniques of power has been useful in examining how particular physical education discourses operated at the preschools. The notion of the technologies of the self has provided a means to move beyond a deterministic view of discourses to a conceptualisation of individuals as actively involved in constructing their subjectivities.

This study has contributed to developing an understanding of the ways in which preschool practitioners and children engage with, take up and resist particular physical education discourses. Interrogating the ways in which the participants talked about ‘physical education’ has allowed for the examination of the workings and effects of physical education discourses and their concomitant practices on

practitioners and young children. By focusing on these particular groups of participants, the study has listened to the voices of people who have not previously been consulted in this way by physical education researchers. In doing so, it has provided insight into ‘what happens’ regarding physical education at three preschool settings, and allowed for greater understanding of the reasons particular physical education discourses and practices may be supported or resisted. I now discuss the discourses that were found to be prevalent at the settings.

## **8.2 Discourses of ‘physical education’ at Oakdale, Cheery Faces and Sunnyland**

### **8.2.1 Introduction**

The first step in the analysis was to examine potential sources of physical education discourses the participants were likely to draw on (Wright, 2004b), in order to identify the discourses available to them. Analysis of the sections of Curriculum for Excellence related to preschool physical education revealed the prevalence of physical activity and health discourses, and the influence of neoliberalism. Developmental discourses also prevail throughout this documentation; they are evident in, for instance, the curriculum’s concerns with motor skill development, play and active learning. Developmental discourses are also prevalent throughout texts related to Early Moves CPD, which some of the practitioners had experienced. This documentation is particularly concerned with motor skill and movement concept development, which it positions as the ‘foundation’ for children’s future physical activity participation, thereby linking motor skill development to a physical activity discourse.

The second step in the analysis involved investigating the discourses of physical education at the settings. I interrogated the participants’ talk, along with the field-notes relating to my observations, in order to investigate the discourses that were circulating and examine the ways in which particular discourses were taken up by particular individuals. An important initial finding was that the practitioners tended not to use the term ‘physical education’ in relation to preschool contexts. While the women at Oakdale said they used it amongst themselves – because the children there

experienced a weekly lesson with the school physical education teacher – the other practitioners were in agreement that ‘physical education’ was not a term used in relation to preschools. This appeared to be because they associated ‘physical education’ with schools, and therefore positioned it as something more ‘formal’ and structured than what children would (or should) experience at preschools. As such, they positioned schools as concerned with education and therefore structure, and preschools as concerned with development and therefore play and freedom. The women regularly drew on discourses related to ‘structure and freedom’ regarding the children’s ‘physical education’. Analysis of the practitioners’ and children’s talk, along with my field-notes, revealed that discourses related to motor skill development, play, physical activity and health – along with this related pedagogical discourse concerning ‘structure and freedom’ – appeared to underpin ‘physical education’ at the three contexts, in different ways.

At Oakdale, a discourse related to motor skill and movement concept development was particularly prevalent. The strength of this discourse illustrated the influence of Early Moves, which two of the practitioners (Tanya and Amanda) were heavily involved with. This discourse also emerged in the data generated at Cheery Faces, though not as strongly as at Oakdale. Along with motor skill development, discourses related to play, physical activity and health prevailed in the participants’ talk and practice at both Oakdale and Cheery Faces. At Sunnyland, play was particularly prevalent, as were concerns with physical activity, health and – to a lesser extent – motor skills. Motor skill and movement concept development may have been less prevalent at Cheery Faces and Sunnyland because the practitioners at these settings had either less or no experience of Early Moves compared to those at Oakdale. It may also have been because the children at Cheery Faces and Sunnyland did not experience weekly structured physical education lessons; motor skill development appeared to be a more prominent concern in relation to adult-led activities. Child-led, unstructured activities, on the other hand, were often positioned – by both children and adults – as times for children to play and to be physically active. This notion of ‘structure and freedom’ in relation to ‘physical education’ drew together discourses related to play, motor skills and physical activity. Sometimes the

discourses were inter-linked (e.g. in the notion of physically active play), while sometimes they conflicted (e.g. when play and more structured activities concerned with motor skill development were positioned as opposites).

The discussion above shows that analysis of potential sources of discourses and of data generated at the settings revealed two broad categories of discourses related to 'physical education'. The first relates to developmental discourses, and includes those concerned with motor skill development and play. The second set of discourses features those concerned with physical activity and health.

The participants engaged with the discourses in various ways. I noted in Chapter Seven that I was wary of making generalisations in relation to gender with regard to the ways in which the children engaged with physical activity and health discourses. I acknowledge that if I had approached my analysis using different 'theoretical lenses' (e.g. from a feminist perspective or with a focus on masculinities), I would likely have interpreted the participants' talk and actions in a different way. However, my analysis indicated that boys and girls tended to talk about and engage in 'physical education' in similar ways. Furthermore, while the practitioners made some sporadic references to differences between boys and girls (e.g. Tanya's comment about "girls that'll run away from the ball" on p. 152, and Jean's comment about "boys...fighting constantly" on p. 207), the 'dividing practices' (Foucault, 1982) the practitioners engaged in most frequently related to children's ages, rather than their genders. I suggest that this apparent lack of a 'gender divide' in relation to how the participants talked about and experienced preschool 'physical education' may relate to the absence of a sport discourse at the three settings. Research focusing on older girls and young women (e.g. Clark, 2009; Wright, 1997) indicates that an emphasis on discourses related to sport and performance may lead to females in particular disengaging from physical education. Although motor skill development – which could be interpreted as a precursor to a sport discourse – was present (to varying degrees) at all three settings, there was more of an emphasis on children's choices and freedom than their performance of particular skills. While the lack of a sport discourse – and therefore a focus on performance – may have been related to the fact

that all of the participating practitioners were female, it also reflected the strength of developmental notions concerning what children ‘should’ and ‘should not’ experience at preschool. I now discuss the developmental discourses I identified during my analysis.

### **8.2.2 Developmental discourses**

The participants’ talk reflected the pervasiveness of developmental discourses in both early childhood education literature, and documentation related to Curriculum for Excellence and Early Moves. The practitioners’ and children’s talk around play, structured activities and motor skill development all relate to developmentalism. Three main discourses around this notion emerged during analysis of the adults’ interview data: children learn and develop through play; children should have choices and freedom; and sometimes more structured activities are needed. These discourses were also evident in the children’s data, although the children often engaged with them in different ways than the adults. For instance, while the practitioners characterised play as a vehicle for learning and development, the children did not talk about it in this way. Furthermore, while the adults tended to position play as an element of everything the children did at preschool, the children’s talk clearly indicated that they did not consider certain preschool activities (e.g. story-time) to be play. Both groups of participants, however, indicated that they valued play and the related notions of children’s choices and freedom.

The three developmental discourses identified were closely interconnected in the participants’ talk and practice. The notion that play is the most appropriate means of learning and development for children of preschool age underpinned the ‘children should have choices and freedom’ discourse. This second discourse operated both in conjunction and in competition with the third discourse, ‘sometimes more structured activities are needed’. The practitioners drew on this latter discourse in different ways; some of them were very much in favour of more adult-led activities at certain times, while others were less comfortable with them. It seemed that the women had different ideas about what a ‘good’ preschool practitioner should do in relation to ‘physical education’. For instance, the women who were nursery nurses tended to

speak more strongly in defence of free play. This may have been because their initial training courses featured little or no content related to 'physical education'. It may also have been because of the high regard play is often held in throughout the early childhood education field, to the point that it can be romanticised (Wood, 2007b; Wood & Attfield, 1996). Consequently, when some of the women did speak in favour of structured 'physical education', it was in relation to regulating children's behaviour, rather than in relation to learning and development. While some practitioners – particularly those who were teachers or managers – spoke about children needing guidance and assistance in relation to 'physical education', opportunities for outdoor 'physical education' in particular were often characterised as a chance to 'let off steam', have a run around and engage in free play. It seemed, therefore, that 'physical education' was positioned by many of the practitioners – particularly the nursery nurses – as a 'break' from the more structured 'classroom' environment. It appeared that, for some of the women, their privileging of play, and the related concepts of choices and freedom, clashed with the notion of structured, adult-led 'physical education'.

The children, however, tended to speak positively about their structured 'physical education' experiences. The talk of the children at Oakdale, for instance, indicated that their physical education lessons with Tanya did not clash with the pedagogical practices they encountered during other preschool education experiences. While the children at Cheery Faces and Sunnyland primarily talked about free play, they too generally spoke favourably about their experiences of more adult-led 'physical education'. This may have been because the structured activities the children at all three settings experienced tended to feature elements of play, and therefore choices and freedom. In this way, the 'children should have choices and freedom' and 'sometimes more structured activities are needed' discourses often intersected. Furthermore, while speaking positively about their structured 'physical education' experiences, the children's talk indicated that they felt 'physical education' – particularly outdoor 'physical education' – should not be too regulated or structured. This was evident in the emphasis they placed on playing, having fun and getting fresh air.



The practitioners – including those who supported a more adult-led approach – similarly talked about the importance of preschool ‘physical education’ not being too regulated or structured. Their investment in developmental discourses meant they positioned observation as an important pedagogical practice. While they may have considered that this meant they were providing children with freedom from adult control, an alternative reading is that observations are a technology of regulation (Ailwood, 2003a) and a technology of normalisation (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2007). The children’s talk revealed their awareness that the practitioners ‘watched’ them and, for instance, looked out for incidences of misbehaviour. Thus, even during activities practitioners and children may have considered to be ‘free’, children were subjected to regulation and control by adults.

The second broad category of discourses to emerge during analysis also involved children being subjected to adult regulation and control. This category concerns discourses related to physical activity and health.

### **8.2.3 Physical activity and health discourses**

The participants engaged with the notions of physical activity and health in multiple, complex ways. Both the adults’ and children’s talk illustrated the dominance of neoliberal, healthism meanings of health which position individuals as responsible for their own health through engagement in ‘healthy’ practices such as those related to physical activity and eating. Both Amanda and Jean – whose talk I particularly focused on – spoke about practitioners’ ‘responsibility’ to encourage children to be active and, particularly in Amanda’s case, to teach them about health. Amanda’s talk revealed that there was a major emphasis on staff ‘taking responsibility’ for children’s health at Oakdale, as the children there were considered to be particularly ‘at risk’ because of their ‘disadvantaged’ backgrounds. While Jean similarly positioned some of the children at Sunnyland as in need of ‘salvation’, the practitioners at Cheery Faces did not speak in this way; none of them expressed concern with ‘rescuing’ children from ‘problematic’ or ‘risky’ family lives (O’Flynn, 2004). The SES of the settings, therefore, impacted on the way ‘health’ was promoted and thus the messages and practices the children received and experienced.

As such, the settings were implicated in the production of the participants' subjectivities (O'Flynn, 2004).

Children at all three settings engaged with the notion of healthism. When asked about health, the first thing many of them mentioned was 'healthy' food. Many of them also talked about the importance of physical activity. However, with the exception of Abbie, they did not talk about these practices in relation to weight. The children's talk indicated that while they were familiar with words like 'exercise' and 'health', and positioned them as important, some of them struggled to explain what they meant or why they were significant. This is perhaps because these concepts were presented to them in simplistic terms by the practitioners. I particularly focused on the talk of Abbie, Jane, Dan and David as they engaged with these concepts in more depth than many of the other children. Their talk showed that they 'bought into' the healthism discourse, but could also resist it in certain ways. All four children talked about physical activity in relation to health, and they all positioned health in corporeal terms. For the two boys, 'good' health meant having strong bones and lots of energy, while for Abbie and Jane, it meant not having 'bad' health. The two girls talked about avoiding 'dangerous' practices, and engaging in 'good' practices related to eating and physical activity in order to be 'healthy'. For Abbie, these practices were necessary in order to avoid overweight and obesity. While Abbie was the only child to explicitly express concern about gaining weight, her talk illustrated that preschoolers may experience feelings such as fear, worry and unhappiness because of concerns about their weight (Burrows & Wright, 2004; Evans, 2003; Evans *et al.*, 2004; Gard & Wright, 2001). Furthermore, her talk indicated that an emphasis on obesity discourses can lead preschool children to engage in self-monitoring and self-surveillance regarding their bodies (Burrows & Wright, 2004; 2007).

Foucault's notion of the technologies of the self provided a means of understanding that the practitioners and children were not merely passive recipients of physical activity and health discourses, but were actively involved in 'taking them up' and thus could show resistance. For instance, Abbie, Jane, Dan and David showed that,

while they ‘knew’ the rhetoric about ‘good’ eating and physical activity practices, they could resist healthism. Abbie and Jane talked about eating treats, while Dan, David and Abbie characterised physical activity as not always ‘good’ because it sometimes made them bored or tired. Perhaps it was the children’s own corporeal experiences of pleasure associated with eating treats and ‘pain’ due to an excess of physical activity that led them to resist healthism in this way. Concomitantly, the emphasis on freedom and choices at the settings – because of the strength of developmental discourses – may have allowed and encouraged the children to demonstrate resistance.

Practitioners Amanda and Jean similarly engaged more critically with the notions of health and physical activity on some occasions. This was particularly the case with Jean. While both women expressed the view that a ‘healthy’ lifestyle need not mean the complete elimination of ‘bad’ foods from the diet, Jean was particularly resistant to regulation that insisted on the eradication of all ‘risks’ to health.

While the talk of the children at all three settings primarily centred on health as a corporeal notion, the practitioners tended to talk about physical activity and health in both corporeal terms and in relation to the self more holistically. Related to this, the practitioners talked about physical activity as a means of regulating the children’s behaviour. The women talked about children’s opportunities for physical activity as a means of counteracting what they regarded as misbehaviour. Physical activity was thus a means of making their jobs easier, by rendering the children easier to manage and control. Physical activity, therefore, like the developmental discourses discussed earlier, involved children being subjected to adult regulation and control, in relation to both their behaviour and their health.

### **8.3 The place and meaning of ‘physical education’ to practitioners and children at Oakdale, Cheery Faces and Sunnyland – conclusion**

This thesis has shown that discourses related to developmentalism and to physical activity and health underpinned ‘physical education’ at three preschool settings in Scotland. The practitioners and children engaged with these discourses in multiple,

complex ways. My analysis has interrogated the effects of these discourses and their concomitant practices on practitioners and children. Following Dahlberg *et al.* (2007), it has not been my intention to “show others the supposed error of their ways or to sell a new line, claiming to have arrived at some definitive and final conclusions” (p. 2). I hope my critical analysis of participants’ talk is not interpreted as criticism of the participants themselves, but of the discourses they drew on. Furthermore, I do not wish to conclude the thesis by providing a prescription for how preschool ‘physical education’ research and practice ‘should be done’. Indeed, I do not think such a prescription can exist. Rather, I provide some suggestions, based on my findings, that I hope may contribute towards positive, inclusive preschool physical education experiences for practitioners and children.

While my analysis has critically interrogated discourses related to developmentalism and physical activity and health, it has not been my intention to imply that these discourses should be abandoned. Rather, I am concerned with potentially negative consequences of uncritical reliance on them. I hope that this thesis has illustrated how important it is for researchers, policy-makers and practitioners to evaluate and critically reflect on the potential workings of discourses they privilege and take for granted. My analysis has shown, for instance, that, as a result of their investment in healthism, practitioners in this study engaged in surveillance and classification of children’s bodies (Burrows & Wright, 2004; Gard & Wright, 2001). Furthermore, a four-year-old participant expressed concern about becoming overweight. I ask: do we want preschool children to feel this way? Do we want them to feel compelled to engage in disciplinary practices such as self-monitoring and self-surveillance regarding their bodies (Burrows & Wright, 2004)? Are we even aware that our preschool ‘physical education’ practices can have these effects? Critically analysing and reflecting on the effects of taken-for-granted discourses and their associated practices is vital in order to make “visible what is usually hidden” (Rønholt, 2002, p. 34) and thus develop an awareness of the potential ‘work’ of particular discourses. Debates around the potential implications of this discursive ‘work’ are essential if we want to create practices that provide an expansive range of possibilities for inclusive preschool physical education experiences.

For researchers and policy-makers planning and proposing programmes, resources or courses related to preschool ‘physical education’, consulting with practitioners and children seems vital to this task of evaluation, reflection and debate. Engaging with practitioners provides an insight into their situations and needs regarding physical education, and thus a greater understanding of why particular discourses and practices may be supported or resisted. Consulting with preschool practitioners also shows them that their voices are valued. When I asked the practitioners in this study about their reasons for entering these particular careers and if their jobs had lived up to their expectations, four of the women (Serena, Vanessa, Jessica and Naomi) positioned their roles as nursery nurses as unvalued and of low status in society. For instance, Jessica stated:

I love my job. Em...I just wish it was more respected. ... Nursery nurses are not really respected a lot. Teachers are – teachers are held in high esteem. ... Nursery nurses – not really. They’re just seen as playing with children. ... I mean the parents we work with do, you know, and people in the profession know how important it is but, you know, outside the profession it’s just seen as childcare, it’s just seen as playing. (Jessica, Sunnyland)

Consulting preschool practitioners about issues that concern them is essential for showing them that their work and their views are valuable. If researchers and policy-makers simply supply practitioners with programmes or resources to employ, they risk marginalising them further by portraying the message that preschool practitioners should just do what they are told by ‘experts’. Furthermore, since preschool practitioners are the best informed people about current preschool ‘physical education’ practice, it seems not just disrespectful but unwise not to consult them about issues related to their daily practice.

For similar reasons, I propose it is important for researchers and policy-makers to also consult with preschool children. Their voices have similarly not been heard in research related to physical education, but as this thesis has shown, talking to preschoolers provides important insights into their daily lives and into the effects of particular discourses. I acknowledge that doing poststructural discourse analysis of preschool children’s talk is not an unproblematic endeavour; for instance, many of

the children's quotes presented in the thesis are quite short. However, building relationships with the children, conducting multiple interviews with them and using a variety of resources encouraged the generation of rich data, as children were encouraged to engage with discourses related to preschool 'physical education' on numerous occasions.

This thesis points to the need for future research to further probe preschool children's engagements with discourses related to 'physical education', particularly those concerned with physical activity and health. Interrogating these discourses was just one aspect of the current study, which meant that my analysis of these discourses primarily focused on the talk of a small number of children. Research with more children would provide further insight into the complex and nuanced ways preschoolers engage with these notions. This seems especially important in the context of an increasing number of epidemiological studies and ensuing policies concerned with increasing preschoolers' physical activity levels in order to prevent obesity and 'unhealthiness'. Further examination and research is needed to examine how these discourses are negotiated and play out in complex ways through the lives, practices and subjectivity formation of both preschool children and practitioners.

It seems especially important for future research to focus on practitioners' and children's lives outside of their preschool settings. A limitation of the current study is that it did not focus more on the participants' individual backgrounds in relation to, for example, social class, ethnicity or gender. Due to my concern with investigating 'physical education' as conceptualised and experienced *at the settings*, thoroughly focusing on the participants' individual backgrounds in this way was beyond the scope of this study. However, I align with Evans *et al.*'s (2008) contention that, in order to more fully appreciate and understand people's engagements with physical activity and health discourses, it is important to "embrace the influences of class, gender and ethnicity in...our analyses" (p. 129). Thus, future research could, for instance, involve preschool children's parents and interrogate the ways in which they engage with discourses related to 'physical education'.

Future research could also investigate the ways in which young children talk about their bodies. It could be argued that the current study did not place enough emphasis on the body as material, and instead focused primarily on the body as constructed through language. I align with Prout's (2000) conceptualisation of bodies as hybrid entities (constructed through both material and discursive practices) and, throughout the thesis, have striven to avoid and disrupt dualisms. However, as a consequence of my concern with attending to "the material body as it is discursively produced" (Francis, 2008, p. 219), I have perhaps inadvertently rendered the participants' bodies "invisible" (Paechter, 2011, p. 311) to the reader. While the participating children made some references to bodies as material (e.g. Abbie's contention that, without exercise, her "tummy [would] get fat" (see p. 247), Abbie's and Jane's talk about tooth decay, and Dan's and David's repeated mentions of strong, healthy bones), the thesis did not directly investigate children's understandings of their own (and others') bodies. According to Paechter (2011), there is a need for research which endeavours "to understand how children and young people think about their bodies" (p. 320). Future research could answer Paechter's call by investigating the ways in which preschool children talk about both their own and others' bodies, including those that are considered to be pathological (e.g. overweight or obese). Prout's (2000) work on hybridity could be useful to such research, as this concept provides a means of moving beyond conceiving of a 'material versus discursive' dualism in relation to how bodies are constructed. Furthermore, it may advance scholarship inspired by the work of Foucault by helping researchers to avoid being solely concerned with bodies as constructed through discursive means.

In relation to preschool 'physical education' practice, this thesis has shown that, while some of the practitioners were reticent about the notion of structured, adult-led 'physical education' for preschoolers, the children generally spoke favourably about their experiences of adult-led 'physical education'. This points to a need for practitioners to critically analyse and reflect on taken-for-granted developmental discourses that position preschool children as 'too young' for particular experiences. The structured 'physical education' experiences the children referred to tended to feature elements of play, and therefore choices and freedom. This indicates that it is

important for practitioners to move beyond thinking in terms of binaries such as ‘physical education versus play’ or ‘structure versus freedom’, as these notions are often intertwined. Furthermore, polarising these notions can lead to tensions and dilemmas for practitioners regarding their pedagogical practices. Thus, it seems vital that practitioners realise that having ‘physical education’ at preschools does not mean taking away children’s chances to play, or subjecting them to highly structured situations in which they are taught in a didactic manner.

A final point I make in relation to preschool ‘physical education’ practice relates to my contention in Chapter One that education – and thus physical education – should be concerned with encouraging children to ask questions and become critical and sceptical thinkers. This thesis has shown that, while many of the children were familiar with words such as ‘health’, ‘exercise’ and ‘fitness’, and told me about the importance of eating ‘healthy’ foods and engaging in physical activity, they often failed to engage with these ideas beyond a surface level. For instance, they seemed to talk in a rote manner about these concepts and practices being important, without explaining why or what they meant. I suggest that this indicates a need for practitioners to encourage children to engage more critically with these notions, which of course practitioners would also initially have to do themselves. One suggestion for practice would be for practitioners to emphasise the importance of acceptance of diversity in terms of body size and shape. Another would be to encourage children to think about why some people may not be able to participate in physical activity. Speaking with less certainty about connections between physical activity, food and health may help children learn that these issues are not simply about ‘good’ and ‘bad’ practices and therefore ‘good’ and ‘bad’ people.

This thesis has shown that the practitioners and children at three preschool settings in Scotland engaged with the notion of ‘physical education’ in different ways. As such, the place and meaning of ‘physical education’ differed from setting to setting, and person to person. In general, however, ‘physical education’ – even if it was not called that – was positioned as an important element of preschool education. Consulting with preschool practitioners and children has allowed me to gain an insight into



preschool ‘physical education’ that previous research has not provided. Just as significantly, it has shown preschool practitioners and children that their voices matter in relation to physical education research. Amanda encapsulated the importance of this when, at the end of her final interview, she said:

...it’s nice to know that...that there’s people who are interested in what we’re doing and, you know, that you...that you consider my little day job to be important enough to, you know, to research and that’s nice to know ’cause you just, you know, you get on with things and you don’t really think about other people being interested in what you’re doing... (Amanda, Oakdale)

I hope that this thesis has shown that Amanda’s “little day job”, and preschool ‘physical education’ in general, is indeed worthy of attention and further research.



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# **Appendix A**

## **Participant information sheet (parents)**



# THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## **Research Study in Preschool Physical Education**

Dear parents,

My name is Nollaig McEvilly. I am a PhD student at the University of Edinburgh. I would like to investigate aspects of preschool physical education (physical development and movement) and explore what physical education means to preschool staff and children in nursery classes. I hope that my study will help to improve physical education experiences for preschool staff and children.

I would like to observe physical education and conduct interviews over the course of 2010. I would like to:

- Conduct recorded **interviews/conversations with some of the children**, and ask them to **draw pictures** and take part in group **mind-mapping** (group drawing and discussion)
- **Observe** and make notes on physical education at the nursery
- Make some **video-recordings** of physical education at the nursery
- Conduct **interviews with the staff** that work with the nursery class.

**All information collected, and any voice- or video-recordings made, will be kept private and confidential. Recordings will never be shown in any public arena. When the results of the study are reported, the name of the nursery and the names of all participants will be changed.**

I would be very grateful if you would allow your child to participate in this research by signing the consent form. Participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your child from the study at any time. Please note that throughout the study I will also ask the children if they are happy to be interviewed, to draw pictures, to take part in group mind-mapping and to be video-recorded.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at \*\*\*-\*\*\*\*\* or [n.mcevilly@sms.ed.ac.uk](mailto:n.mcevilly@sms.ed.ac.uk), or my supervisor, Dr. Martine Verheul, at \*\*\*\*-\*\*\*\*\* or [mverheul@staffmail.ed.ac.uk](mailto:mverheul@staffmail.ed.ac.uk). You can also contact me if you would like to know the results or receive a copy of any publications arising from the study.

Many thanks in advance!

Nollaig.

## **Appendix B**

### **Consent form** **(parents)**





# THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## **Parental Consent Form**

I have been given information about my child's participation in Nollaig McEvilly's research, which is being conducted for her PhD degree at the University of Edinburgh, under the supervision of Dr. Martine Verheul.

I understand that, if I consent to my child's participation, he or she will be asked to:

- Participate in recorded **interviews/conversations** relating to preschool physical education (physical development and movement)
- **Draw pictures** and take part in group **mind-mapping** relating to physical education
- **Be observed and video-recorded** while involved in physical education.

I understand that my child's participation in this research is voluntary, and that I can withdraw him or her from it at any time. I have been assured that any information my child provides and recordings he or she features in will be kept private and confidential, and that the recordings will never be shown in any public arena. I have also been assured of anonymity. I am aware that throughout the study, my child will be asked if he or she is happy to be interviewed, to draw pictures, to take part in group mind-mapping and to be video-recorded.

If I have any questions, I know that I can contact Nollaig McEvilly at \*\*\*-\*\*\*\*\* or [n.mcevilly@sms.ed.ac.uk](mailto:n.mcevilly@sms.ed.ac.uk), or Dr. Martine Verheul at \*\*\*-\*\*\*\*\* or [mverheul@staffmail.ed.ac.uk](mailto:mverheul@staffmail.ed.ac.uk). I also know that I can contact Nollaig McEvilly if I would like to access the results or any publications arising from the study.

By signing below, I am indicating that I consent for my child to participate in the study. I understand that the data collected from my child's participation will be used for a PhD thesis, for academic papers and for conference presentations, and I consent for it to be used in this manner.

Child's name:

---

Parent's signature:

---

Parent's name (please print):

---

Date:

---

## **Appendix C**

### **Participant information sheet (practitioners)**



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## **Research Study in Preschool Physical Education**

Dear staff members,

My name is Nollaig McEvilly. I am a PhD student at the University of Edinburgh. I would like to investigate aspects of preschool physical education (physical development and movement) and explore what physical education means to preschool staff and children in nursery classes. I hope that my study will help to improve physical education experiences for preschool staff and children.

I would like to observe physical education and conduct interviews over the course of 2010. I would like to:

- Conduct recorded **interviews with the staff** that work with the nursery class
- **Observe** and make notes on physical education at the nursery
- Make some **video-recordings** of physical education at the nursery
- Conduct recorded **interviews/conversations with some of the children**, and ask them to **draw pictures** and take part in group **mind-mapping** (group drawing and discussion).

**All information collected, and any voice- or video-recordings made, will be kept private and confidential. Recordings will never be shown in any public arena. When the results of the study are reported, the name of the nursery and the names of all participants will be changed.**

I would be very grateful if you would agree to participate in this research by signing the consent form. Participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at \*\*\*-\*\*\*\*\* or [n.mcevilly@sms.ed.ac.uk](mailto:n.mcevilly@sms.ed.ac.uk), or my supervisor, Dr. Martine Verheul, at \*\*\*\*-\*\*\*\*\* or [mverheul@staffmail.ed.ac.uk](mailto:mverheul@staffmail.ed.ac.uk). You can also contact me if you would like to know the results or receive a copy of any publications arising from the study.

Many thanks in advance!

Nollaig.

## **Appendix D**

### **Consent form** **(practitioners)**



# THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Staff Consent Form

I have been given information about my participation in Nollaig McEvilly's research, which is being conducted for her PhD degree at the University of Edinburgh, under the supervision of Dr. Martine Verheul.

I understand that, if I consent to participate, I will be asked to:

- Participate in recorded **interviews** relating to preschool physical education (physical development and movement)
- **Be observed and video-recorded** while involved in preschool physical education.

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary, and that I am free to withdraw from it at any time. I have been assured that any information I provide and recordings I feature in will be kept private and confidential, and that the recordings will never be shown in any public arena. I have also been assured of anonymity.

If I have any questions, I know that I can contact Nollaig McEvilly at \*\*\*-\*\*\*\*\* or [n.mcevilly@sms.ed.ac.uk](mailto:n.mcevilly@sms.ed.ac.uk), or Dr. Martine Verheul at \*\*\*\*-\*\*\*\*\* or [mverheul@staffmail.ed.ac.uk](mailto:mverheul@staffmail.ed.ac.uk). I also know that I can contact Nollaig McEvilly if I would like to access the results or any publications arising from the study.

By signing below, I am indicating that I consent to participate in the study. I understand that the data collected from my participation will be used for a PhD thesis, for academic papers and for conference presentations, and I consent for it to be used in this manner.

Signed:

---

Name (please print):

---

Date:

---

## **Appendix E**

### **Sample round one interview schedule (practitioners)**

## **Sample round one interview schedule**

### **Participant's background**

1. Can you tell me about your role as the nursery teacher here at Oakdale? What does it involve? For how long have you held this position?
2. For how long have you been working as a nursery teacher (i.e. overall, not just at Oakdale)? What is your background (i.e. regarding training/qualifications etc.)?

### **'Physical education' with the nursery class**

3. How many staff members work with the nursery class? How many staff members are involved with their 'physical education'?
4. Is the term 'physical education' used with/regarding the nursery class? (If 'no', then what are the reasons for this?)
5. Can you tell me about the nursery class's 'physical education'? What does it involve (i.e. structured physical education class, less structured movement time, unstructured free play/physical activity time)? How often do the children have 'physical education'?
6. What curriculum is used with the nursery class regarding 'physical education'?
7. Can you tell me about your role in the nursery class's 'physical education'? What does it involve (i.e. teach/lead/assist/help with planning etc.)?

### **Participant's 'physical education' training/CPD**

8. We spoke previously about your background and the training/qualifications you undertook to become a nursery teacher – did you experience much training regarding 'physical education' during your studies? What did it involve/focus on? Do you feel that it was satisfactory/sufficient? Why/why not?
9. Have you ever participated in any CPD courses etc. related to 'physical education'? Can you tell me about them? What did they involve/focus on?
10. Can you tell me your reasons for choosing to participate in such courses? (Or if she has never participated in any, why not?) Did you have support from management etc. to do these courses? Management's view of 'physical education'? Parents?
11. Did the courses you participated in live up to your expectations? Were your reasons for undertaking them adequately addressed? How/why/why not?

12. Have the courses impacted on your views of 'physical education'? And how you teach/facilitate 'physical education'? In what ways?
13. Would you be interested in participating in further courses related to preschool 'physical education' in future? (Why/why not?)
14. What particularly would you be looking for in such courses? What would be most useful to you? Why?

**Participant's views of 'physical education'**

15. Can you tell me what the term 'physical education' means to you, as a nursery teacher?
16. What do you believe 'physical education' for preschoolers should involve/focus on? What should its main focus or purpose be? Why do you think this should be its main focus?
17. Was this the main focus of the physical education you experienced as a child yourself? Was physical education something you enjoyed when you were at school? Why/why not? What did you like/dislike about it?
18. Do you feel that the physical education you experienced when you were at school has impacted on or influenced how you feel about 'physical education' today, and how you go about planning and teaching/facilitating it? In what ways?
19. Do you enjoy teaching/facilitating 'physical education' at the nursery? Why/why not? What do you like/dislike about teaching/facilitating it?

[20. **Closing question** – is there anything else that you would like to add regarding what we have spoken about today?]



## **Appendix F**

### **Sample round two interview schedule (practitioners)**

## **Sample round two interview schedule**

### **Introductory questions**

1. You said in the previous interview that you hadn't been involved in any CPD related to preschool 'physical education' – have you been involved in any since then? What did it involve/focus on?
2. Have there been any changes to what happens regarding preschool 'physical education' since the previous interview? Has your role and what you do in preschool 'physical education' changed in any way?

### **Term 'physical education'**

3. When I asked in the previous interview if the term 'physical education' is used with/regarding the preschool children, you said "now that it's Curriculum for Excellence, it's health and wellbeing". Do you think 'physical education' is a term that would generally be used in or regarding preschool education? **If no** – Why do you think this is?

### **Further exploration of her views and beliefs regarding preschool 'physical education'**

4. When I asked in the previous interview what you think 'physical education' for preschoolers should focus on, you said, "building their confidence in their own, sort of, physical skills. Not really developing any specific skills, but building...their own confidence in doing things...I think that's the main thing it needs to develop, is the children's confidence in their own physical abilities." Do you still feel this way? Is there anything you want to add to that? Why is this important to you?

### **Further exploration of her role in preschool 'physical education'**

5. Both from my observations and from your previous interview, with reference to your role when you are outside in the garden with the children, I know that you are "More observing – you...observe their play because you don't want them to play any, like, fighting games or anything like that...step in when the games start getting too far and, kind of, pull them back... And sometimes you've got the odd one who's...a bit lost – you have to try and involve them... And just making sure that they're safe...that they're not hanging off the side of the climbing frame or, you know, being silly...[and] being there if they need you as well" – can you explain this further? Why do you play this role?

6. Can you explain when/why you choose to do more structured activities with the children in the garden? What is your role like at these times? How do you feel about playing a more leading role? Are you comfortable with this? Why/why not?

7. I asked in the previous interview if the role you play out in the garden is similar/different to the role you play inside the nursery, and you said, “It’s more a laidback role in the garden – it’s more take a step back...and let them, have more of a free play...they do have free play up in the room, but you’re always...doing something; there’s always an art out, you’ve got art out or you’re trying to encourage them to take part in something up in the room, whereas...in the garden, it’s more...“Let’s step back and watch what they’re doing” and if they need you, step in and try and guide the games to a good game and not ‘let’s all fight each other’ game.” Is this still the case? In what ways are your roles inside and outside similar and different? Why?

**Further exploration of the discourses of preschool ‘physical education’**

8. I’ve seen that free play seems to be a big theme of preschool ‘physical education’ here – would you agree with that observation? Is it important to you personally as a theme of preschool ‘physical education’? Why do you think it is so important here?

9. What do you think of when you think of ‘play’? What does ‘play’ mean to you? Is play important? Why? Is there a place in preschool education for both play and more structured ‘physical education’/activities? **If yes** – Why is structured time important? Why/why not? Is it difficult/easy to strike a balance between the two? Why/how?

10. Similar questions as in Q8 regarding other discourses – i.e. **physical activity, health, skill development**.

**Physical activity in her own life**

11. We spoke in the previous interview about your own experiences of physical education when you were at school – you said it was something you enjoyed more at primary school and the early years of secondary school than when you got further along in secondary school. You also said you were “very active...a physically active person”. Can you tell me about the place of physical activity in your life now? What do you do? Why do you do it? [Or why don’t you do it?]

[12. **Closing question** – is there anything else that you would like to add regarding what we have spoken about today?]

## **Appendix G**

### **Sample round three interview schedule (practitioners)**

### **Sample round three interview schedule**

#### **Questions regarding choosing to become and being a preschool practitioner**

1. We spoke in your first interview about your background as regards training and qualifications to become a preschool practitioner – why did you decide to become a preschool practitioner?
2. Has the job lived up to your expectations? In what ways?
3. Tell me some things you like about being a preschool practitioner. What do you think are the most important aspects of your job/most important things you do as a preschool practitioner?
4. Are there things about your job that you don't like/wish you could change? What, in an ideal world, could be done to improve your job? If you had a wish-list...
5. Do you think you will stay in this career long-term? Why/why not?

#### **Curriculum for Excellence**

6. I asked you in the previous interview about how you found the changeover to Curriculum for Excellence – you mentioned that the biggest change was in terms of paperwork. Could you tell me about your planning and how you use the curriculum?
7. I asked you in the previous interview about health and wellbeing more widely (not just 'physical education'). To follow up on that, I wondered if – as well as the children actually going to the garden and doing *Sticky Kids* etc. – you ever talk to them about 'physical education'/physical activity/exercise, why they do it etc.? Do they learn about movement etc., as well as actually doing it?

#### **Further exploration of her views of 'physical education'/discourses of 'physical education'**

8. I said in the previous interview that, from my research, I would say that physical activity – the children having a chance to get out in the fresh air and use up energy and run around – seems to be a big theme of preschool 'physical education' here, and

you agreed, and said that because of being dark these evenings and because many children live in flats, it's important they get that opportunity here. Why is this important? [Do all children choose to do physically active activities when free to do what they want in the garden? Is this important?]

9. Learning: It's come through in both interviews that you "definitely see" yourself as an "educator" – you enjoy doing e.g. group-time, story-time etc. It seems that teaching and learning is important to you as a preschool practitioner (as well as e.g. providing opportunities for free play)? Is learning important in the garden too? You spoke previously about doing shapes, colours, social skills etc. through physical games etc. in garden – is it important to learn physical things too? E.g. I said that motor skill development seems to be a theme of preschool 'physical education' here – is motor skill development something children need help with, or need the freedom to go and do themselves? Do children need help and guidance regarding 'physical education'?

10. Do you think you do 'physical education', even if it's not called that?

#### **Preschool 'physical education' CPD**

11. If someone from the physical education community (maybe not familiar with preschool children) was going to plan preschool 'physical education' CPD or put together a resource, what would you – as an experienced preschool practitioner – say would be important things for them to know or consider or take into account?

#### **Experience of being a research participant**

12. How have you found the experiences of being a participant in this research? How have you felt about having someone doing observations, and taking part in the interviews?

[13. **Closing question** – is there anything else you would like to add regarding what we have spoken about today, or in the previous interviews?]

## **Appendix H**

**Paper to be published in**  
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## Sport, Education and Society

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cses20>

### Understanding the rationale for preschool physical education: implications for practitioners' and children's embodied practices and subjectivity formation

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Available online: 08 Aug 2011

To cite this article: Nollaig McEvilly, Matthew Atencio, Martine Verheul & Mike Jess (2011): Understanding the rationale for preschool physical education: implications for practitioners' and children's embodied practices and subjectivity formation, Sport, Education and Society, DOI:10.1080/13573322.2011.606807

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2011.606807>



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# Understanding the rationale for preschool physical education: implications for practitioners' and children's embodied practices and subjectivity formation

Nollaig McEvilly<sup>a\*</sup>, Matthew Atencio<sup>b</sup>, Martine Verheul<sup>a</sup> and Mike Jess<sup>a</sup>

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This paper provides an overview of selected academic research literature that underpins contemporary preschool physical education. We highlight and interrogate diverse rationales and beliefs that serve to influence and structure preschool physical education in various forms. We speculate as to how preschool practitioners and children might engage in specific practices relative to these discourses. Our consideration of preschool physical education discourses relies upon a Foucaultian analysis of the major techniques of power and also raises possibilities of conceptualising subjectivity formation through his concept of the 'technologies of the self'. Discourses related to motor skill development, play and physical activity, in particular, appear to be prevalent in the selected literature, along with a related pedagogical discourse concerning 'structure and freedom'. These sometimes competing discourses arguably underpin competing agendas reflecting those who advocate supporting children's free play and those who propose more structured and interventionist practices in relation to young children's physical activity. We conclude that these diverse approaches lend themselves to interpretation and negotiation in the context of preschool physical education, with specific consequences for the embodied experiences and subjectivities of preschool practitioners and children.

**Keywords:** *Physical education; Preschool; Discourses; Foucault; Pedagogy; Play*

## Introduction

This paper seeks to map and examine the discourses associated with preschool<sup>1</sup> physical education in selected academic literature. Our aim is not to establish what is 'good' or 'bad' about preschool physical education research and practice, but to explore, from a poststructural perspective, the possible effects of 'truth' discourses that underpin contemporary preschool physical education research. We raise critical questions related to how these discourses impact upon children's and practitioners'

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practices as they are taken up, negotiated and deployed in preschool contexts. This analysis specifically involves ‘making visible’ the ways in which certain discourses become inter-linked with knowledge and power relations, leading to the privileging of particular practices and embodied subjectivities (Wright, 2006). By speculating about the workings of preschool physical education discourses in this way, we aim to encourage the opening up of ‘spaces for alternative ways of “knowing” and “being”’ that may provide ‘new possibilities for practice’ (Wright, 2006, p. 60).

Our investigation is timely, given that the physical education of preschool children has arguably increased in profile due to concerns with obesity and sporting success (Marsden & Weston, 2007). In the United States, the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) issued a position statement in 2000 noting that, ‘The importance and value of movement is being recognized as never before. Early childhood educators have become increasingly aware that movement plays an important role in the future development of a young child’ (p. 2). This position statement was followed by the publication of physical activity guidelines for children from birth to five years of age (NASPE, 2002). More recently, in Denmark, Herskind (2010) notes heightened governmental interest in preschool physical education. In Scotland, the government’s Physical Activity Task Force (2003) recommends that children from three years old receive at least two hours of physical education per week. Other developments in Scotland include the continuing evolution of Basic Moves (Jess *et al.*, 2004) – a physical education programme for five- to seven-year-olds – to also focus on preschool physical education (Jess & McIntyre, 2009). These developments show that preschool physical education is becoming a focal point for governments and policy groups.

Despite increased attention for preschool physical education, there appears to be no consensus as to what constitutes quality and meaningful preschool physical education, and the effects of different conceptual underpinnings on practice are largely unknown. In this paper, we attempt to clarify how such influential concepts have been discussed in the related research literature so as to signal possible effects related to children’s embodied experiences as well as practitioners’ pedagogical practices. This analysis involves interrogating how the privileging of certain discourses might serve to create specific conditions for preschool practitioners and children.

### **Investigating preschool physical education discourses**

Much of the socio-critical research in physical education (e.g. Webb *et al.*, 2004) and related areas such as physical activity, sport and health (e.g. Atencio & Wright, 2009) has enhanced our understanding of discourses, power relations and subjectivities in relation to secondary school students or adults, with some recent focus on primary school children (e.g. Burrows, 2010). This research draws on poststructural theory in order to illustrate how particular discourses become ‘normalised’ and privileged

within particular social and cultural contexts, and then ‘work’ to create and sustain practices that produce diverse subjectivities and power relations.

Our work seeks to enhance existing physical education research by similarly drawing on Foucault’s concepts of power, discourse and subjectivity formation in relation to preschool physical education. To do this, we consider the discourses of preschool physical education that are evident throughout selected academic literature. Our poststructuralist approach to analysis differs significantly from discourse analytic scholarship associated with formal linguistics (Burrows, 1999). Following Wright (2004), we use a discourse analysis that is concerned with identifying patterns in language use. Rossi *et al.* (2009) propose that there are no fixed rules or guidelines when implementing this type of discourse analysis, although the use of social theory is prominent. In our analysis, then, we utilise Foucaultian theoretical tools in order to interrogate the ways discourses and power relations circulate (Burrows, 2010) in selected preschool physical education literature in order to highlight consequences for practice.

Other discourse focused studies in physical education which have relied upon Foucaultian theory include Burrows and Wright (2004), who demonstrate how prevalent media discourses structure health and physical education practices that influence children’s subjectivity formation. Foucault (1973) describes discourses as sets of truths that are (re)produced through power relations and social practices operating in institutions, such as schools, prisons or, in this case, preschools. According to Foucault (1998), ‘it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together’ (p. 100). We draw on Foucault’s work around techniques of power (1983, 1998) to investigate the discourses of preschool physical education which have currency throughout selected academic research literature, in order to examine the potential effects on preschool physical education practice, and therefore on practitioners and children. Like Gore (1995), we believe that ‘the techniques of power which Foucault elaborated in prisons [are also] applicable to contemporary pedagogical practice’ (p. 168). Techniques of power (e.g. disciplining individuals and exercising surveillance) operate in institutions such as schools and preschools in order to produce and constrain particular actions and practices (Evans & Davies, 2004). Competing discourses work to become established as ‘normal’ and ‘ascendant’, leading to the codification of certain practices and knowledges. Macdonald *et al.* (2002) remind us that discourses are productive, as they are ‘systems of beliefs and values that produce particular social practices and social relations’ (p. 143). We speculate about the impacts of particular discourses on practitioners’ and children’s sense of self, which is directly linked with being physical and embodied. As Webb *et al.* (2004) note, power becomes operationalised in schools and ultimately inheres itself in pupils’ bodies during physical education:

In terms of understanding how power functions in schooling, physical education offers an important venue for study given the centrality of the visual and active body. [...] Although power is embodied in all subject areas, the effects are

magnified in physical education where the content of study is both about and through the human body. (p. 209)

From a poststructural perspective, embodied subjectivities are constructed in relation to discourses that are negotiated and taken up; they are not viewed as fixed, but as fluid, conflicted and constantly in process (Weedon, 1997). Subjectivities are constituted in relation to particular discourses, which describe and define the world and how to act in it (O'Flynn, 2010). Subjectivity is thus 'an effect of discourse' (Weedon, 1997, p. 82).

Along with his work around techniques of power, we draw on Foucault's work around the 'ethical conduct' or 'care' of the self (1986, 1997b) and his concept of the 'technologies of the self' (1997a), which refers to modes of self-governance. The concept of self-governance illustrates how individuals may refuse particular 'normalised' or 'othered' subjectivities by taking up specific 'technologies of the self'. The 'technologies of the self' suggest that individuals may resist and disrupt prevailing power structures and discourses in order to constitute subjectivities that lead to the pursuit of happiness and ethical lives; individuals have 'freedom' to 'transform themselves' in order to become 'moral' subjects of their own actions (Foucault, 1997a, p. 225). This aligns with MacLure's (2003) assertion that 'although subjectivities are formed within discourses, people are not simply passive recipients of their "identity papers"' (p. 19).

Our analysis will interrogate preschool physical education discourses which may be negotiated and taken up by practitioners and children in order to constitute their subjectivities. To do this, we critique selected research literature in order to highlight the discourses that appear most prevalent and powerful. We raise critical questions about particular ascendant and competing discourses in order to evaluate and problematise the 'work' that these discourses can do in relation to practice. Our intention is to 'disrupt' and 'unravel' those discourses which may appear obvious, natural or unquestionable (MacLure, 2003). Our analysis probes around questions such as: (1) what discourses related to preschool physical education are circulating in contemporary physical education research literature?; (2) what 'truths' and meanings about preschool physical education are constructed and privileged in this literature?; (3) how are the discourses inter-connected and how might they compete with each other?; and (4) what are possible consequences regarding practitioners' and children's practices and subjectivities?

### *Methodology*

Literature was initially sourced through Google Scholar throughout 2009 and 2010. Search terms were combinations of the terms 'preschool', 'early childhood', 'early years' and 'kindergarten', with 'physical education'. Table 1 lists the number of sources located during this initial search.

As Table 1 illustrates, a large number of sources contained the search terms somewhere in the text. However, as indicated by the number of sources which had

Table 1. Number of sources located during Google Scholar searches.

Search terms entered into Google Scholar (English language preference selected)	Number of sources with search terms anywhere in article	Number of sources with search terms in title of article
Preschool 'physical education'	17,500	79
'Early childhood' 'physical education'	15,900	48
'Early years' 'physical education'	13,300	9
Kindergarten 'physical education'	20,200	98

the search terms in the title, significantly fewer focussed specifically on the topic we were investigating. We sorted through the sources which had the search terms in the title. Much of what we sourced has been published in professional journals such as *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance* (e.g. Liu *et al.*, 2010), or in books aimed at students and practitioners (e.g. Zachopoulou *et al.*, 2010). This literature is primarily concerned with providing practical advice on teaching and facilitating physical education. Our focus was to investigate academic research papers that would be underpinned by theory and possibly influence policy and practice with potential effects on children and practitioners. Therefore, we did not include the professional literature in our analysis, although future studies could analyse these texts. We wanted to examine research-based literature that provided peer-reviewed empirical accounts of preschool physical education, rather than professional or practical accounts. For the same reason, we discounted documents that comprised curricular guidelines. Wanting to specifically focus on published research papers, we eliminated masters and doctoral theses. We also decided not to include research published in journals specifically concerned with special educational needs or developmental delays, such as *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly* (e.g. Block & Davis, 1996), as we felt that such research was beyond the scope of our analysis and had a different or more specific focus than our study. We decided to concentrate our analysis specifically on papers published in English-language physical education and/or sport pedagogy academic journals, and were left with two sources – Marsden and Weston (2007) and Piéron *et al.* (1996).

Being left with such few papers suggested to us that we needed to rethink our search strategy. We decided to examine the titles of papers in all back issues of *European Physical Education Review*, *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy* and *Sport, Education and Society* and the titles of papers published since 1990 in *Quest* and *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*. In addition to the two papers found during the Google Scholar searches, we sourced the following 15 papers related to 'preschool', 'early childhood', 'early years' or 'kindergarten' during the search of the five journals: Männistö *et al.* (2006), Kirk (2005), Cleland (1994), Martin *et al.* (2009), Derri *et al.* (2001), McManus (2000), Welsman and Armstrong (1998), Herskind (2010), Macdonald *et al.* (2005), Macdonald *et al.* (2004), Stodden *et al.* (2008), Clark (2005), Stork and Sanders (2000), Valentini and Rudisill (2004) and Sanders and Graham (1995). Table 2 lists the 17 papers we sourced in total.

By 'physical education', we mean planned, structured learning experiences in curricular time. Therefore, to select the papers to analyse, we discounted those that did not actually focus on 'physical education' (e.g. Clark, 2005, which is concerned with movement development throughout childhood). We also eliminated those that specifically focused on children with special needs or developmental delays (e.g. Valentini & Rudisill, 2004), and those that did not solely concern children in preschool and kindergarten (e.g. Macdonald *et al.*, 2005). Table 2 shows that we eliminated 13 of the 17 papers sourced. The four papers selected for analysis were: Martin *et al.* (2009), Derri *et al.* (2001), Sanders and Graham (1995) and Herskind (2010). We subjected these four texts to 'close reading' (Burrows, 2010, p. 239) in order to find patterns of terms used and specific rationales and concepts. We do not intend our analysis to be considered as an examination of the 'complete' collection of research literature associated with preschool physical education, but as a selected 'mapping of the complex webs of ideas and beliefs which have been ascribed "truth" status' (Burrows, 1999, p. 43). This approach follows Rossi *et al.* (2009) who suggest that those conducting critical discourse analysis must make particular choices about 'what it is that needs analyzing' (p. 80) and limit their investigation to particular texts or sections of texts.

### *Analysis of selected research papers*

Both Martin *et al.* (2009) and Derri *et al.* (2001) are concerned with motor skill development. This appears to be a regular theme within the academic preschool physical education literature; of the 17 papers we sourced, 8 are specifically concerned with motor development. Martin *et al.* (2009) investigated the effects of motivational climate on kindergarten children's motor skill performances and conclude that a mastery motivational climate can have a positive impact on children's fundamental motor skill performance. These authors demonstrate the strength of the motor skill discourse in their paper when declaring that, 'One of physical education's unique contributions to the education of all children is motor skill performance. Thus, physical education teachers must create climates that support the learning of movement skills' (p. 237). The words 'unique', 'all' and 'must' illustrate how these authors regard motor skill development to be the primary aim of physical education in kindergarten.

Aligning with this view, Derri *et al.* (2001) declare motor skill development to be 'critical' (p. 16) and describe the potential 'embarrassment' and 'fear' of injury and ridicule that children who 'fail to develop these skills' may face if trying to learn them in later life (p. 17). This powerful image of scared, sad children strongly portrays the message that motor skill development must be prioritised in preschool physical education. The authors' references to benefits associated with the development of motor skills further emphasise this notion:

By developing motor skills . . . children fulfil their desire for movement, build their bodies, and enhance their attention. In addition, they develop cognition as well as

Table 2. All 17 papers located after Google Scholar and journal searches.

Authors	Title	Reason eliminated/selected
Marsden and Weston (2007)	Locating quality physical education in early years pedagogy.	Eliminated – not specifically preschool
Piéron <i>et al.</i> (1996)	An investigation of the effects of daily physical education in kindergarten and elementary schools.	Eliminated – not just preschool
Männistö <i>et al.</i> (2006)	A school-based movement programme for children with motor learning difficulty.	Eliminated – focus on special needs/developmental delays
Kirk (2005)	Physical education, youth sport and lifelong participation: the importance of early learning experiences.	Eliminated – not specifically preschool
Cleland (1994)	Young children's divergent movement ability.	Eliminated – not specifically preschool
McManus (2000)	Physical activity in children: meaning and measurement.	Eliminated – not specifically physical education
Welsman and Armstrong (1998)	Physical activity patterns of 5 to 7-year-old children and their mothers.	Eliminated – not specifically physical education
Macdonald <i>et al.</i> (2005)	'I could do with a pair of wings': perspectives on physical activity, bodies and health from young Australian children.	Eliminated – not preschool children
Macdonald <i>et al.</i> (2004)	Physical activity as a dimension of family life for lower primary school children.	Eliminated – not preschool children
Stodden <i>et al.</i> (2008)	A developmental perspective on the role of motor skill competence in physical activity: an emergent relationship.	Eliminated – not specifically physical education
Clark (2005)	From the beginning: a developmental perspective on movement and mobility.	Eliminated – not specifically physical education
Stork and Sanders (2000)	You say potâto, I say potâto: problems associated with the lack of shared meaning in instruction and learning.	Eliminated – not preschool children
Valentini and Rudisill (2004)	Motivational climate, motor-skill development and perceived competence: two studies of developmentally delayed kindergarten children.	Eliminated – focus on special needs/developmental delays
Martin <i>et al.</i> (2009)	Motivational climate and fundamental motor skill performance in a naturalistic physical education setting.	Selected – preschool physical education
Derri <i>et al.</i> (2001)	Effect of a music and movement programme on development of locomotor skills by children 4 to 6 years of age.	Selected – preschool physical education
Sanders and Graham (1995)	Kindergarten children's initial experiences in physical education: the relentless persistence for play clashes with the zone of acceptable responses.	Selected – preschool physical education
Herskind (2010)	Tensions and dilemmas in body-pedagogy in kindergarten – employees' effort to transform a vocational education programme about body and movement into practice.	Selected – preschool physical education



language skills through learning new terms and discussing these during, and after, practice. (p. 17)

By positioning motor skill development as the source of such an array of benefits, it is constructed as unquestioningly 'good' and 'imperative' for preschool children.

Our poststructural perspective, however, requires that we question the 'taken-for-grantedness' (Tinning, 2006, p. 372) of this assumption and interrogate the workings and potential effects of this discourse. We therefore ask: is the privileging of motor skill development in preschool physical education an unproblematic endeavour? Thorpe (2003) suggests that it is not. He critiques the privileging of motor skill development in physical education, claiming that it views the acquisition of certain motor skills as 'essential' to learning, and invokes the notion of a national 'crisis' whereby children are viewed as 'deficient' in sport and in need of expert knowledge and training. Wright (1997) similarly argues that the skill acquisition model leads to gendered practices, whereby girls, in particular, often come to be viewed as deficient and unskilled. She suggests that centring the physical education curriculum on discourses which privilege knowledge and practices associated with traditionally masculine team games works to construct unequal power relations and devalued identities.

Both Wright (1997) and Thorpe (2003) indicate that the privileging of a motor skill development discourse in physical education can lead to classification and exclusion (Gore, 1995) of some individuals. We take up this view to critique the work of the motor skill development discourse found in the selected literature. For instance, Derri *et al.*'s (2001) frequent references to the 'ages and stages' literature of developmental psychology powerfully evoke images of what children at particular ages 'should' be able to do. They cite literature which refers to the skill development of 'cognitively and physically normal children, from ages two through six or seven' (p. 16). The word 'normal' immediately implies that some children will be labelled as 'abnormal'. Could this binary lead to classification and exclusion (Gore, 1995) of some preschoolers because of perceived motor skill deficiencies?

Derri *et al.* (2001) create a further binary when proposing that, 'Free play seems unable to guarantee significant development of more complex locomotor skills which appear relatively late in children's motor behaviour' (p. 23). By constructing the motor skill discourse in opposition to a discourse associated with free play, they appear to align with the view, critiqued by Thorpe (2003), that children need expert knowledge and training.

Unlike Derri *et al.* (2001), Martin *et al.* (2009) do not create a binary between motor skill development and play, but construct them as potentially more inter-linked. Martin *et al.* (2009) compared the effects on motor skill development of kindergarteners who experienced a direct instructional, teacher-centred physical education intervention, with those who experienced a more child-centred, exploratory situation. The authors hypothesised that 'children exposed to the mastery

motivational climate...would achieve greater improvement in motor skill performance compared with students who experienced a low autonomy climate' (p. 229). Thus, rather than constructing motor skill development and play in opposition to each other, these two discourses come together through the notion of a mastery climate. This is illustrated in Martin *et al.*'s (2009) description of what lessons with a mastery climate entailed:

Children entered the classroom and sat in the circle where the teacher explained the different fundamental motor skills stations (i.e., throwing, hopping, kicking) fashioned for that day. Students were then invited to move freely throughout the stations during activity time and each station had at least two levels of task difficulty. During this time, students were allowed choice in which stations to visit, the length of time they wanted to spend at each one, level of task difficulty, and their partner. (p. 231)

In this extract, notions of children's freedom and choice are enmeshed with Martin *et al.*'s (2009) focus on children's motor skill development. Thus, while Derri *et al.*'s (2001) earlier quote depicts how discourses can sometimes be constructed as conflicting and oppositional, Martin *et al.*'s (2009) paper illustrates how they can also be positioned as inter-linked.

Assessing children's motor skills is not the primary focus of the third paper we examined, but it too is concerned with the discourse of children's play. Sanders and Graham (1995) used qualitative methods (observations, field notes and interviews with children and teachers) to investigate kindergarteners' initial experiences of participating in physical education. They found that the children demonstrated 'a relentless persistence for play' (p. 376), which clashed with the teacher's attempts to give instructions. Sanders and Graham frequently deploy terms such as 'by nature' (p. 372), 'a natural disposition' (p. 372, p. 373), 'natural desire' (p. 373), 'natural tendency' (p. 376, p. 378) and 'natural characteristic' (p. 376) when describing children's play. For instance, they state:

At a basic level, all children enjoy play and are *by nature* playful. Play is what young children do when they are not eating, sleeping, or complying with the wishes of adults (Gallahue, 1989). Although play is not likely to become a part of school curricula, one can argue that children come to educational settings with a *natural disposition* to take on early school experiences in a playlike manner. (p. 372, emphasis added)

The words 'by nature' and 'natural' imply that young children 'should' be engaging in play. We are left to speculate about the potential effects when play is 'normalised' and 'naturalised'. What might be the consequences if play is constructed as an 'innate' and 'natural' activity and behaviour? Does play become a normalising discourse at the expense of alternative understandings? Does it have implications for practitioners and how they come to view and teach children? For instance, we wonder if a possible implication of a prevalent play discourse might be that practitioners are reluctant to structure or lead children's activities.

Another line of questioning relates to how the belief that play is 'natural' and 'innate' impacts upon children's agency in the context of adult-led and structured

pedagogies. Drawing on Foucault's concept of the 'technologies of the self' (1997a), we wonder how children might utilise play as a means of contesting dominant discursive practices linked with bodily control and training. This line of analysis raises questions about alternative practices and subjectivities that children might construct through play. For instance, were the children in Sanders and Graham's (1995) research demonstrating that they would not be 'docile' bodies (Foucault, 1979)? Rather than expressing an innate, predisposed, 'natural desire' (Sanders & Graham, 1995, p. 373) to play, were the children showing that, through play, they could resist the teacher's control and 'actively constitute and govern themselves' (Atencio & Wright, 2009, p. 34)?

While Sanders and Graham's (1995) research depicts a potential clash between discourses associated with adult-led, structured physical education and child-led, free play, at the end of the paper these notions are constructed as potentially more inter-linked:

...movement experiences for young children should stress learning through play. This is not to suggest that children are undirected, but that movement tasks should provide children with opportunities to develop skills in an exploratory, problem-solving, playlike environment. (p. 382)

Similar to Martin *et al.* (2009), Sanders and Graham (1995) are enmeshing notions of play with a concern for skill development. This again illustrates how discourses can fluidly shift and change throughout the literature, sometimes appearing in competition and at other times inter-linked.

Sanders and Graham's (1995) paper primarily depicts a potential clash between adult-led, structured physical education and child-led, free play. A notion of 'structure versus freedom' is evident throughout early childhood education literature. Examination of this literature reveals that play is a prevalent discourse, and a possible dilemma for practitioners arises because of contrasting views regarding supporting children's play and being more interventionist. Much literature pertaining to children's play emphasises that it should be voluntary and intrinsically motivated (e.g. Bruce, 2005). Moyles (2006) sympathises with early years teachers, whom she feels are told on the one hand that children learn very little without teacher direction, and on the other that children's play must be self-initiated (Tamburrini, 1982, cited in Moyles, 2006). Wood (2007) similarly recognises that practitioners 'are caught between contrasting perspectives' (p. 316). Similarly, while Sanders and Graham (1995) focus mainly on children's resistance to a structured, adult-led situation, the fourth paper we examined, Herskind (2010), concerns practitioners' difficulties with such situations.

Herskind (2010) investigated Danish kindergarten employees' experiences of implementing 'Moving Children', an educational programme aiming 'to increase the physical activity in children's daily life' (p. 187). Herskind found that while, at one level, the implementation of the programme was successful (the children became more physically active), the process was rife with tensions and dilemmas. Herskind

explains that Danish kindergartens traditionally place great emphasis on children's play and self-governed activities:

... Danish kindergarten employees share a set of fundamental beliefs and attitudes that 'a rich environment and children's self-governed activity provide the best opportunities for a comprehensive development of the child' (Broström, 2006a, p. 392). [...] In this tradition, the central position of the teacher in adult-organised and structured activities has been considered incompatible with a movement- and body-pedagogy that relies on ideals and beliefs concerning children's development through play and self-governed activities. (Herskind & Rønholt, 2007) (pp. 187–188)

Herskind explains that, because 'structured play, as opposed to free forms of play, has been perceived as congruent with teaching in an authoritarian manner' (p. 188), implementing 'Moving Children' required a major transformation of practitioners' practices. She claims that this transformation was particularly challenging for those who were inexperienced regarding sport or physical education, or who had negative memories of their own childhood physical education experiences.

The use of these binaries (traditional views versus a new approach; positive previous experiences versus negative previous experiences) helps Herskind to depict the contrast between structured and free play oriented discourses, while highlighting the ways in which teachers came to take up, negotiate, and (re)produce particular discursive practices. She further emphasises the complexity of the process when, citing Goffman (2005), she interprets some of the participants' behaviour as being 'an expression of defence or avoidance of something humiliating' (p. 198). Herskind explains that, as participants were 'confronted with new standards for kindergarten pedagogy' (p. 197), they were faced with re-negotiating their subjectivities according to the newly emerging definition of 'a good kindergarten employee' (p. 198); a further binary, as the notion of a 'good' employee also conjures up the image of a 'bad' employee.

Herskind (2010) explains that 'Moving Children' was devised as a result of two government policy initiatives, the first of which 'challenged the strong affiliation to the concept of "development" and children's self-governed activities', thus appearing to 'clear the way for acceptance and legitimation of ... more "school-like" and adult-organised' activities (p. 189). The second policy was concerned with health promotion:

Another political intervention is the governmental health programme "Life Long Health" (2002). It underlines the importance of the initiation of early interventions in children's institutions to prevent and combat obesity and lifestyle diseases ... physical activity and sports are first and foremost considered significant factors in the war against obesity and in the prevention of associated life style diseases. (p. 189)

Herskind explains that she mentions these policy developments in order to highlight the degree to which kindergartens are influenced by political agendas in which physical education is 'considered of value and importance as [a] means to combat illness and obesity' (p. 189). Her paper challenges the 'taken-for-grantedness'

(Tinning, 2006, p. 372) of the seemingly unquestioning ‘goodness’ of these political agendas, and their focus on physical activity and obesity discourses, by illustrating their effects on practitioners’ practices.

Like Herskind, we too wonder about the possible effects of these physical activity and obesity discourses. We critique the ways in which the increasing number of political agendas and epidemiological studies seeking to increase physical activity participation amongst young children in order to prevent obesity and ‘unhealthiness’ have great power to structure preschool physical education. This research, mainly published in scientific and medical journals, is primarily concerned with health promotion and obesity prevention, as demonstrated by statements such as, ‘Recent increases in the prevalence of overweight and obesity in preschool and school-age children constitute a significant and growing public health problem’ (Dowda *et al.*, 2004, pp. 183–184). The terms ‘increases’ and ‘growing’ signify urgency, persuading us that research on preschool children’s weight and physical activity levels is necessary and justified. Indeed, Cardon *et al.* (2008) explicitly state that ‘there is an urgent need for effective interventions aimed at increasing physical activity in preschoolers’ (p. 6). This ‘urgent need’ is justified by reference to ‘the childhood obesity epidemic’ (p. 5) and the claim that ‘preschoolers are characterized by low levels of physical activity and high levels of sedentary behaviour’ (p. 6). These quotes position physical activity research and practices at preschools as unquestioningly ‘good’ and ‘imperative’. We believe, however, that the discourse whereby children are positioned as ‘couch potatoes’ who require structured disciplinary practices such as exercise and fitness to rectify their seemingly unhealthy behaviours requires problematising (Atencio, 2010; Gard & Wright, 2005).

## Discussion

Our aim has been to map and examine the discourses associated with preschool physical education in selected academic literature. In four selected papers, we analysed discourses related to motor skill development, play and physical activity. Sometimes these discourses were competing. For instance, motor skill development appears to be constructed in opposition to play by Derri *et al.* (2001). Similarly, play and more structured physical activities are conflicting in both Sanders and Graham’s (1995) and Herskind’s (2010) papers. Often, however, the discourses can be seen as inter-related. For example, discourses related to motor skill development and play overlap in both Martin *et al.*’s (2009) and Sanders and Graham’s (1995) papers. A related discourse concerning ‘structure and freedom’ regarding children’s activities and practices is evident throughout the four papers.

Our concerns raised through the discourse analysis centre around how these discourses potentially underpin pedagogical practice and influence children’s learning and self-formation. We wonder what the impacts of these discourses are on how practitioners – and children – construct particular power relations and subjectivities. For instance, one possible effect of a play discourse that invokes

notions of children's 'natural' and 'innate' desires and capacities is that practitioners may feel reticent about organising and structuring activities. Herskind's (2010) study appears to support this notion, as it illustrates the tensions and dilemmas a more adult-led pedagogical approach involved for some practitioners who valued children's play and self-governed activities. Herskind's findings align with the work of some early childhood researchers (e.g. Moyles, 2006; Wood, 2007) who recognise that contrasting views on play can create pedagogical dilemmas for practitioners. For practitioners who align with the view that children's play should always be voluntary, intrinsically motivated and 'free', the notion of leading children's activities can be problematic. The strength of this free play discourse, and the influence it has on practitioners, is evident in research (e.g. Moyles *et al.*, 2002) which shows that the notion of 'teaching' preschool children is problematic for some practitioners. Consequently, we wonder about the possible effects of this powerful free play discourse on children's physical education experiences. While we suggested earlier that it could allow children to demonstrate agency and resist and contest being constructed as 'docile bodies' (Foucault, 1979), we take a different line of questioning here. We wonder: do all children, when left to their own devices, choose to participate in play that is physically active? This prompts us to further ask: do some children need or want more guidance or encouragement than others? Does the seeming necessity of children having ownership of their play discourage practitioners from providing this guidance and encouragement?

Herskind's (2010) study illustrates that it is not only preschool children, but also practitioners who regularly re-negotiate their subjectivities in relation to available discourses. Webb *et al.* (2004) raise a similar point regarding PE teachers, noting that they too are 'caught up in these projects of identity production' (p. 208). Sicilia-Camacho and Fernández-Balboa (2009) propose that critically approaching knowledges 'can enable people (teachers and students) to adopt alternative positions within different "regimes of truth"' (p. 451). In the context of play-oriented and more structured activities, this view highlights how people may come to resist and disrupt prevailing power structures and discourses through 'technologies of the self' (Foucault, 1997a), rather than being merely passive recipients of prevailing discourses.

Burrows (2010) proposes that poststructural analysis invites the interrogation of gaps, silences and contradictions, which suggested to us the necessity of exploring the seeming invisibility and fragmented nature of preschool physical education as a subject area, in particular in sharp contrast to the large and increasing body of research on preschool children's physical activity. We suggest that this concern with measuring preschoolers' physical activity levels may work to create situations whereby practitioners are positioned as 'truth' experts who hold considerable power in structuring children's experiences, behaviours and subjectivities. Little, if any, attention is given in the epidemiological literature to the notion of children's voices and their capabilities for agency. We wonder if children are thus positioned simply as 'docile' bodies (Foucault, 1979) that must be controlled and monitored by expert adults. Further Foucaultian analysis could reveal the ways in which children in these

contexts are positioned in deterministic and even deficient ways through ‘truth regimes’ and become subjected to biopedagogies (Harwood, 2009). The concept of biopedagogies suggests that children in health promotion and obesity prevention contexts become subjected to disciplinary practices that aim to surveil, control and re-shape their bodies and ultimately their embodied selves. We wonder about the possible effects of these discourses and their concomitant practices on young children. Burrows and Wright (2004) suggest that, as well as encouraging adults to engage in surveillance and classification of children’s bodies and practices, an emphasis on obesity discourses may lead children to engage in self-monitoring and self-surveillance regarding their bodies (e.g. their physical activity levels and eating practices). We ask: do we want preschool children to feel compelled to engage in such practices? Might such disciplinary practices lead to some children experiencing feelings of guilt, anxiety and unhappiness (Burrows & Wright, 2004)? We propose that further research is necessary to reveal how these physical activity and health promotion discourses and their associated disciplinary biopedagogies in preschool contexts might be taken up and negotiated by practitioners and children in diverse and perhaps resistant ways.

## Conclusion

Marsden and Weston (2007) declare that the media focus on health, fitness and obesity, along with national concerns regarding success in sport, means that ‘discourses about Physical Education (PE) for young children have, perhaps, never had quite so high a profile’ (p. 383). Our aim in this paper was to examine discourses associated with preschool physical education in selected research literature. Discourses related to motor skill development, play and physical activity were prominent in the four papers we analysed, along with a related pedagogical discourse concerning ‘structure and freedom’. We suggest that it is important to move beyond thinking of this discourse in terms of a binary, as these notions are often inter-twined, and furthermore, the polarisation of ‘structure’ and ‘freedom’ can lead to tensions and dilemmas for practitioners regarding their teaching practices.

The analysis undertaken in this paper provides ways of ‘seeing’ the discourses of preschool physical education as they are taken up in selected academic literature. We suggest that further examination and research is needed to examine how the various discourses associated with preschool physical education are negotiated and play out in complex ways through the lives, practices and subjectivity formation of practitioners and children. Foucault’s notion of ‘technologies of the self’ (1997a; 1997b), which suggests that individuals can consciously take up and deploy particular practices to reach ‘perfection’ and ‘happiness’, may help us to understand how and why practitioners and children might come to invest in particular discourses, rather than others. We acknowledge, however, that resistance and alternative modes of self-governance may only be possible when individuals have been exposed to alternative discourses, or at least exposed to the notion that

alternative discourses are possible. A key question for the future thus becomes: what are the possibilities that preschool children and practitioners can access, interpret, and re-fashion discourses so that they come to construct embodied subjectivities that provide them with a sense of 'ethical' freedom and happiness? How might we envision and eventually support these types of liberatory practices in preschool physical education contexts?

Recent political awareness has illustrated that the provision of preschool physical education is an important endeavour. In this context, we hope that our analysis may contribute towards the establishment of a significant preschool physical education agenda, both in terms of research and practice. We realize that our analysis has raised more questions than answers (Wright & Burrows, 2006). Indeed, this was our intention; following Rønholt (2002), we believe that critically analysing discourses 'makes visible what is usually hidden' (p. 34) and opens debates around their potential implications for practice. We believe that such debates are important in relation to preschool physical education so that researchers, policy makers and practitioners alike can evaluate and critically reflect upon their taken-for-granted assumptions and practices. In this way, they can develop an awareness of the potential 'work' of particular discourses, and strive to create practices which provide an expansive range of possibilities for inclusive preschool physical education experiences.

### Acknowledgements

We would like to express sincere thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback and helpful advice on earlier drafts of this paper.

### Note

1. In this paper, 'preschool' refers to children's educational experiences before they begin formal schooling (i.e. when they are generally aged three to five years). In many countries, 'kindergarten' is similarly defined. In the USA, 'kindergarten' caters for five- and six-year-olds in a preliminary year at elementary school before they enter compulsory education in Grade 1 (Bertram & Pascal, 2002). We include 'kindergarten' within our definition of preschool, and thus focus on children from approximately three to six years of age. The terms 'early childhood' and 'early years' concern children up to the age of eight years, be they at preschool or in the early years of primary school.

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